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FANTASY

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Issue 8
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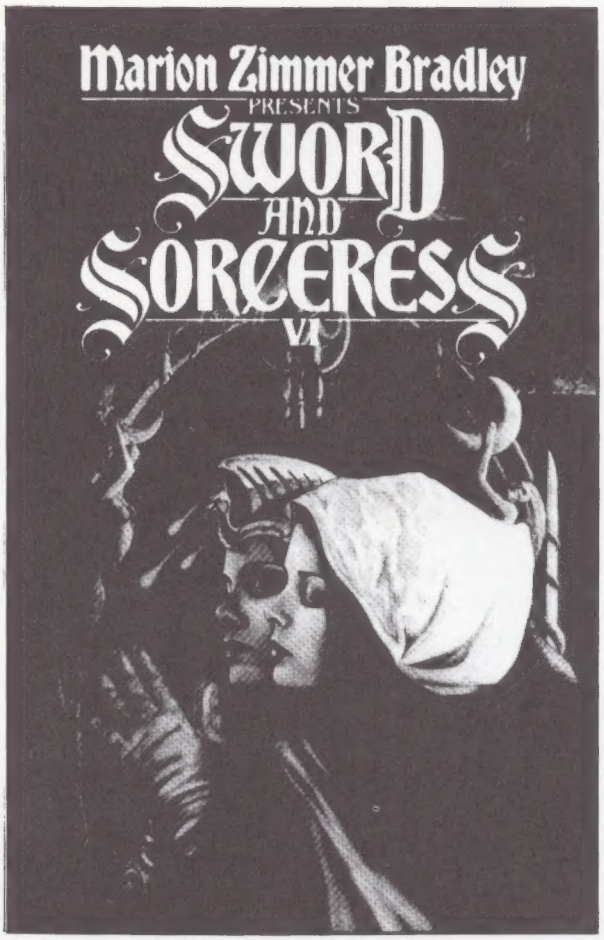

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FANTASY

Magazine

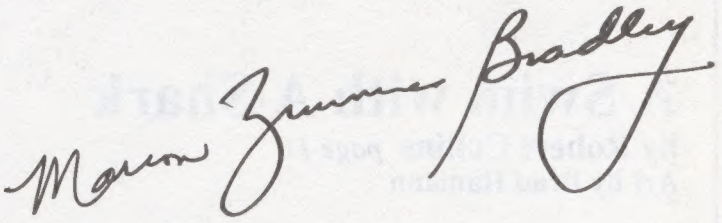
EDITORIAL

In this issue you will find the best of the stories sent to us which verge on science fiction. They're all good reading; you won't read here any hymns to technology or spaceships — nor stories where the technology is more important than the people. But science fiction isn't all spaceships. It can be any science—even the strangest beasts of biology, as in the *Siren* , or *Weal and Woe*. Maybe this will broaden your view of science – or of fiction. Let us know what *you* think. In MZB TALKS TO WRITERS I try to explain on what basis I call a story science fiction or horror rather than fantasy—a question the world of genre fiction has been trying to solve for years. So maybe after this issue I won't get so much science fiction I am unable to publish.

In our cover story, *Change*, Ms. Clayton has one of the most fascinating aliens I've read about in fifty years in this business. I have also included a kind of story I seldom use; Patricia Shaw Mathew's story *Son of the Sun,* which is historical fantasy. Too many stories of this kind are hardly fantasy, just pre-technological societies which, for all they're called fantasy, might as well take place in Troy, New York. But Ms. Mathew's story really raises that old sense of wonder. And for that, I'll violate any or all of my guidelines.

So now you know the secret; I'm looking for something which rouses a sense of wonder, the one thing needful without which all else is nothing. That's what I'm really saying in all my rejection slips: it didn't have a *sense of wonder*. For a story which has that, guidelines don't matter too much.

Sincerely yours,



Marion Zimmer Bradley

MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S

Fantasy Magazine

Issue 8 Spring 1990

Cover Story –

Change

by Jo Clayton *page 4*
Art by Alan Gutierrez
Cover Art :
James Balkovek

I chose this story–and built the issue around it– because, though it's obviously s-f, it has a real feeling of fantasy–what I call THE SENSE OF WONDER–for which I'll break all of my own rules.

Son of the Sun

by Patricia Shaw Mathews *page 14*
Art by George Barr

Another rule breaker by a writer I regard as one of my luckiest discoveries. This reminds me a little of the classical historical fantasies of Mary Renault and, of course, if you go back far enough all history is fantasy.

A Swim with A Shark

by Robert Collins *page 11*
Art by Brad Hamann

I am really a sucker for stories of the "biter bit" type where a crook as a cheat gets what's coming to him.

Hubert the Barbarian 23
by Martin Levy
I think everybody's sick of the perfect barbarian who is always handsome and competent. This one is completely different!

The Siren 27
by Patrick Swenson
This is one of the most fascinating monsters I've read about in a long time. Manatee were suppose to be the original mermaids–sailors who had been at sea for years thought they looked like beautiful women. I can imagine a manatee right out of SEA WORLD–how about you?

Weal and Woe 31
by E.R. Stewart
Art by James Balkovek
Once again a very unusual monster–strange beasts represent the outer fringes of biological s-f. I'd hate to meet an ice-wolf in a dark alley. Would you?

Time to Diet 37
by Larry Hodges
We lost a good production assistant over this story, she thought it was insulting to every fat person in the audience. What do you think? As a diabetic I'm a perpetual dieter, so I loved this.

Caela and the Daemon Spawn 39
by John S. Manor
Art by Brad Hamann
This is not intended to be science fiction: our heroine goes to hell on horse back–which isn't the way it's usually done.

Silver Eyes 46
by Laura D. Todd
Art by James Balkovek
More cute little monsters –this story is a heart-tugger. But then I can be very sentimental, can't you?

Power of the Peaks 49
by Gregory Remington
This is, forthrightly, a story of magic–the powers of love and hate– with the fury of the magician leading to a real surprise ending.

Julio's Rock 57
by Barbara Rosen
Art by James Balkovek
I liked this story, though I usually prefer fantasies of the "far away and long ago"—but this is modern and anyone who's taught grade school knows horror can be here and now. An eerie story of what we'd have to call a pet rock–only not quite.

OUR REGULAR FEATURES

Guest Editorial: 21
No Nice Way To Put It
by Parke Godwin
There are, sometimes, no easy answers. Pete Godwin, author of several terrific novels, tells it like it is– people who can't stand the heat had better get out of the kitchen.

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Change

by Jo Clayton

1

In the hollow the Ouloud had dug into the lake shore's hardened mud, damp dripped slowly from fine root hairs feathering the irregular ceiling, droplets crawling down the roots, clinging for a last moment to the blunt tips, dropping finally into the emptiness below with sometimes sharp tings if they fell into the deepening puddle, sometimes hard rattles as they hit the dead husk of the hibernating Ouloud. The tap-slap-ting continued uninterrupted as the pool around the husk rose higher and higher until at last the drops no longer fell on husk or mud, fell only on water.

A sharp crack jarred through the plinks.

A line of blue-white light shimmered in the muddy water.

The husk moved, lay still, moved again in short sharp jerks, lay still again, again jolted about as the crack widened.

The cold light strengthened in the hollow, winking back from silicate crystals in the dirt and shining through the agitated water onto the pale roots.

Her back and buttocks out, the Ouloud rested again, then with one convulsive heave, she kicked free of the husk and straightened her cramped limbs. Her eyes were sealed shut, dark smudges behind translucent lids. Her head was studded with hundreds of small nodules, the tight-coiled threads inside writhing and pressing against skin still too soft and thick for them to burst through. Skeleton and pulsing organs and the Daughter Within were dim shadows in flesh-like milk glass lit by her self-generated radiance.

Like a great worm she wriggled up the slippery mud to the highest point of the hollow and began scratching blindly at the plug of packed earth that sealed her in. At first her hands scrabbled over the cold soil without effect, then her fingers broadened and grew harder until they were deep gouges that bit into the plug and tore away great gouts of earth.

When she burst from the hollow, she crouched on the steep slope of the lake shore, blind head turning slowly from side to side, shape shifting hands groping clumsily at the night air until she lost the sense of where she was and tumbled in an awkward sprawl into the water.

Passively she accepted the embrace of the snow-melt, sinking until she floated a dozen feet below the surface; she let the currents nudge her where they would until she came to rest against a rocky islet near the lake's outlet where a creek tumbled downslope over a spray of boulders.

The sky began to grey, a red line spread along the eastern horizon.

The slow process of waking went on; the Ouloud's skin hardening and thinning, her metabolism speeding up.

When sunlight touched her face, she stirred, opened her eyes, her ice grey irids darkening to the color of wetted stone. Webs spread between lengthening fingers. Gills opened on neck and chest. She breathed her first breath and began swimming, aimlessly at first, then she became aware of hunger. She snatched a fish, tore it into small bits, held them in her toothless mouth while her digestive juices liquified them.

The day continued to brighten. She stopped swimming and floated upright in the center of the lake, her head a dozen feet below the surface, waiting with plant-like patience for the moment of ripeness.

When the sun was directly overhead, shimmering down to her through the clear cold water, her cilia burst from

ALAN GUTIERREZ

their nodules, springing out from her head like dandelion fluff.

The tendrils tasted the lake water, fluttered wildly. Change. Danger. She tasted again. Poisons. Yes. Metals. Yes. Burning her cilia, oozing into her body. Other substances. Unhealthy.

Disorienting.

She raged about the ragged oval, trilling her fury, her outrage. Her lake and its contiguous land especially, but also every inch of the Island, from the peak of her Mountain to the seashore, this was her Place, an extension of herself. Its violation was a knife in her flesh, but rage alone was futile, there was no healing in anger, so she calmed herself and let the water settle around her.

Hanging motionless again she searched into the layer upon layer of memory passed from Ouloud to Ouloud since the first of their line ripened into awareness, searched for croons that she could weave together to exorcise the poisons and destroy the poisoners and give her back her peace. Shadows crept across the water as she considered and discarded.

When she found what she sought,

Change

she abandoned memory for the moment and kicked toward the surface, her body altering as her head broke water, gill slits closing, air sacs thickening into lungs.

NOISE. Shrieks of hurting metal, thumpings and roarings, rattles and squeals, SOUNDS that hammered at her, louder than storms, terrible, punishing SOUNDS. With their echoes bouncing back at her from her loved Mountain, they were all around her, everywhere, she couldn't tell where they were coming from. She shuddered and cowered in the water unable to think or move, battered almost shapeless by the NOISE.

Slowly, painfully, her cilia coiled tight against her head, she reduced her hearing, circumscribed it until the pummelling was bearable and she could string thought to thought once more.

Eyes refocused for longsight, she turned in the water and scanned the Lakeshore, beginning at the outlet and the creek, turning slowly, seeing only trees and a few birds, turning to face her Mountain. Oo-loo! There was a hole in the mountainside, with debris piled carelessly around it. Coming out of the hole there were two lines of metal set on heavy baulks of wood half buried in gravel. A wooden flume ran beside them, filled with water from a spring higher on the Mountain—she knew that as clearly as if that flume carried fluids from her body. A line of carts with metal wheels came worming out the hole, pulled by a team of ponies, a Talking Beast riding the first cart with a long whip in his hand that he flicked now and then at the ponies' tails. The carts went clacking along the rails until they vanished into the trees. She turned through another quarter arc, saw smoke rising, saw the ridgepole and the upper part of a shingled roof, the rest of the THING invisible behind more trees. The wind was blowing snatches of that smoke toward the Lake. She could smell the poisons in it. Rage seized her again, shook her until her head ached and the Daughter Within stirred dangerously.

A new fear chilled her. No. This is not the time. Not yet. She wrapped her arms about her body and sang a quieting croon at the dark worm inside her. One day the Daughter Within would truly wake and eat herself free and a new Ouloud would swim these waters, walk this land. But not now. No.

She frowned at the smoke, considering the order of her acts. The Lake first. The Lake MUST be cleansed. That would be hard. It would mean waiting and resting before she undertook the second act. No matter. The Lake first. Then the THING that poisoned the Lake. Then the Beasts who built the THING. When the Island was clean again, she could rest and consider the Daughter and what the stirring meant.

She drew power into herself and began singing the new-made croon that shaped and ordered it.

Waterspouts like spinning tops grew from the surface of the lake, sucking up the tainted water and spitting it out purified in a light continual rain, the muck that poisoned it left isolated in thickening collars near the rim. The watercones swayed and twisted on their tiny bases as the pollutants continued to accumulate, wobbling more and more wildly as the Ouloud strained to hold them up, her cilia whipping in a white cloud above her head. Her croon grew more intense, louder, until the sound filled the lake valley and came murmuring back to her, weaving in and out of the Thing-sounds.

When the burning in her cilia was gone, she wove a new trill into the croon, a trill that hooked into a high wind and drew it down across the spouts. Another trill. The stain-collars turned to dust and the wind snatched them way, taking the poisons out over the ocean, away and away from HER Land.

Her throat raw, her eyes burning, the Ouloud loosed the spouts and drifted into sleep, letting the lake currents take her until she lodged against the rocky islet, her body cradled by the cold water, her sleep so deep she knew nothing for many hours, missing completely the excited shouts from the smelter workers and their haphazard search of the lake and lakeshore.

2

As if she hit at Toja and Moriawha and the rest of the Whaka-ekinriks infesting House and Island—and Issian and Tarag and Cunnothat and every muc that shamed the name Huanin with the way they sucked up to the conquerors, Tassin knelt on a piece of sacking and stabbed the trowel again and again into the dark, crumbly soil, loosening the earth about the bubble roses with a controlled ferocity that sent the tight pink buds swaying on their curved stems. If Old Moriawha found her out here working the earth like a farmgirl, the hag would yell her into the House and scold her until a beating would be a welcome change, but if she stayed inside another minute with the rest of Toja's whores, she'd be clawing the walls or killing someone, probably Issian, that fluttering bitch. Fitha Spog, you'd think she'd have a proper value for herself, lovely as she is. Like Mama said, lovely is as lovely does. And that being so, I'm a hag as well.

She straightened her spine, grunting with the effort, scraped the back of her hand across her forehead, ignoring the crumbs of dirt that dropped from the trowel onto her bulging middle. Ah-weh ah-weh, who am I to call them names for doing what they have to. It's their pride in it I spit on. Me. Toja's whore. She stuck the trowel into the earth beside her knee and began tweaking out chinchea weedlings whose small trefoils dyed her fingers green and raised a minty smell that bit sharply through the sweeter scent of the bubble buds. The odors brought back the times when she was free and young and exploding with the springtime. Before. She wrenched a trefoil loose and flung it away. Before. It was an ugly word. Ugly and filled with pain. Before. Yes. Before the Whaka-ekinriks came in their hideous metal steamboats. Before the Rik Taua Apekoura came with his Ka-eera and took the Island away from Clan Huanin. Before his son-heir Toja Apekojira caught her carrying water from the spring and carried her off instead. Before she was heavy with his cursed brat. She'd shed it even now, given half a chance, and take her licks from the Mother's Wrathrod for disdaining Life.

Half a chance? No chance. Old Moriawha, she did the divination and swore it was a boy. The only one he'd got with all his whores and his kinrik wife Namiwi, a knife-blade bitch that one was, addicted to lacha and barren in the bargain.

Moriawha. Fitha Spog, I loathe that one. Old witch, kinrik witch, doting on her fosterling boy, wanting what he wanted and ready to do anything to see he got it. But she was right, curse the hag with boils and itches. A woman of the Huanin knew what her child was as soon as the child knew.

He'd think she was trying to rid herself of her burden if he caught her out here now, so close to the herb garden. Fool man, there was nothing there that would do the job, she'd thought of that ages ago and given it up. The evil creature would beat her on the feet, ah yes he would, and it would be a week at least before she could hobble about without weeping at the pain. And she'd bite her lip till it bled before she'd weep in front of Issian or any of that pack.

She moved across to the tubers, began pinching back shoots and clearing away the weeds. A pair of warbler daymoths fluttered past overhead, looping and fluting through a vigorous, noisy courting. The chimer in the corner thrust its puzzle crown above the outwall and trapped late afternoon sunrays in yellow-green crystals that sang loudly enough to cut through the noise of the shearing sheds down past the u-bend where the creek met the river. The sun was hot on her back and neck, a pleasant heat, the moist dark earth was cool and accepting under her. She forgot her servitude, forgot her resentments, forgot the dangers of lingering out here, forgot the boredom waiting inside the house, felt once again a part of earth and everything . . . .

A SOUND came down the mountain, an eerie rising and falling that stood the hairs up along her spine.

Tassin shivered. The Ouloud was awake at last and SHE was raging. The smelter. Anyone with a grain of sense would know SHE'd hate it.

The last Ahraddin to Speak the Ouloud died thirty years before, during the Invasion, but the Awashin Sagolar took her role and told the Rik not to build the smelter up there. *If you have a need for water, build your contrivance on the River,* he said. *SHE doesn't go there often,* he said. *You'll taint HER lake,* he said. *SHE'll wake and destroy us all in her anger,* he said. And that was true, true it was. And true too that Toja would not hear him.

Tassin got heavily to her feet, shook out her skirt, hid the trowel behind the loose brick beside the kitchen door.

Toja never listens to what he doesn't want to hear. The Awashin tried and all he got for it was his tongue ripped out. Poor man, ah the poor man. That won't work with HER, you bastard son of a bastard line. HER you'll hear, oh yes. She looked at her hands. They were stained with earth and green ooze. Ah-weh ah-weh, I'd better get inside.

Moriawha caught her going up the back stairs. "And where have you been?"

Though it gave her gas to do it, Tassin bowed her head and bent her knees in a sketch of a curtsy. "In the garden, listening to the songs of the Mountain, Tikan Moriawha."

"You should be resting."

"Respectfully, Tikan Moriawha, it is you keeping me from my bath and bed."

The old woman scowled at her, Tissan could see her wrinkled hands itching to slap. "When the boy is born, we'll see, we'll see."

"A ra, Tikan Moriawha," Tissan said politely and brushed past her.

The bath she'd ordered was waiting, the water tepid, the scent gone stale a bit, but she sank neck deep into the infusion and lay there floating, feeling the warmth creep into her and erode away a moiety of her fears.

She sniffed at her hands before she washed them, smelling the earth again,

Change

drawing a bit of strength from it, clearing the dither from her mind. Ah-weh ah-weh, well I know what I should do, but how I'll do it, that's another thing altogether.

She was afraid again and cold, more than the cooling of the water could be blamed for. She turned the tap and let the hot water come splashing in. Give them this, the Whakaekinriks were good for something. Running water hot and cold and lamps that didn't smoke and choke you and inside toilets and steam irons that didn't burn you and what you were pressing and mirrors you could actually see your face in and books, oh the grand books that Toja had, books she never saw him open except once, late at night when she couldn't sleep and wanted something to pass the hours until dawn.

Except for the books, that was an evil evil room; she hated it. Like his father before him, Toja kept his trophies there, rounds of skin cut off the chests of the Huanin men he'd killed in battle and in chase, the part where the totem signs and the name cartouches were tattooed. She'd made the mistake once of telling him how gloriously her lover had pleasured her and how much he disgusted her. That was the night he showed her the round from Tonn's chest, smooth and supple, a long time tanned. He watched her vomit and scream and pull out chunks of hair. He sat there holding that round of skin and watched her cry until she'd wrung all the tears from her body. He sat there silent, without moving all the time of her grief. Then he walked away and left her. She never saw that skin again; it wasn't with the others when she looked.

Issian kicked at the door. "You asleep in there, you longfaced ewe? Have some consideration, will you?" She kept on yammering and punctuating her yammer with more kicks and a bang or two.

"Shut up, gasti," Tassin yelled back. Groaning at the effort she caught hold of the towel rail and lifted her clumsy body from the water. She hobbled to the door, banged her fist on it. "You don't stop your blathering, I'll set my fist to your blue blue eye and you won't be seeing a thing but black for the next seven days."

In the ensuing silence Tassin towelled herself as dry as she could. Having wrapped a quilted robe about herself and tied the belt, she lifted the latch, straightarmed the door open and marched out; her belly going before her, Toja's get that Issian wouldn't have the nerve to lay a hand on.

An hour after midnight, a workbag hanging on her shoulder, Tassin slipped from her room. She listened a moment, grinned as she heard Moriawha snoring, stretched out on the pallet dragged across the door. Bad dreams and belly aches and knowing that your bones are sore for nothing, hag, I'm using the headwife's exit.

Keeping close to the wall, she ghosted to Namiwi's door, took a butterknife out of the bag and pushed back the tongue of the lock. When she had the door open, she dug out the wad of bread that she'd stuck in there to keep the tongue from going all the way in when Namiwi turned the key, tossed the bread aside and walked into the sitting room. She listened a moment at the bedroom door, heard what she expected to hear. All the livelong day Namiwi had been acid as a just-budded grape, temperish from need. Now she was muttering and giggling, making the bed creak as she thrashed about. Chewing lacha and not about to care if the world went red and turned to dust.

Tassim crossed to the door into the hall and swung up the bar, eased the door open a crack and looked along the hallway. There was no guard out there. She re-evaluated the sounds in Namiwi's bedroom and grinned again. The gander's getting sauced tonight and all the luck in the world to the cook. She still thought Namiwi was a bitch on wheels, but there was a touch of fellow feeling in her as she slipped through the dark, silent halls and crept into the kitchen. By smell and by feel she found bread and cheese and stuffed them into the workbag, then fumbled her way to the door that led from the kitchen into the stables.

She groped across the stable, unbarred and pushed open the door to the outside and let the light of the full moon come flooding in. There wasn't much likelihood she'd be interrupted. Taseachan, the stableman, was snoring in the loft and fumes of sourflon came dropping down to mix with hay and horse.

Nose twitching, rubbing sneezes back, she saddled and bridled one of the gentler geldings, hauled herself into the saddle and clattered out to find the smelter road. It was a long road and a hard one and she had hours before her to regret this, but all the regrets in the world wouldn't change what had to be.

3

It was early morning when the Ouloud woke, a crisp clear morning with a vigorous breeze that ruffled the surface of the lake and set glitters dancing through the water. She looped and tumbled about the lake in a dance of celebration that woke echoes in the liquids of her body until they fizzed through her in joyous effervescence. Hungry, she caught three fish and ate them in her slow way, continuing to announce her contentment with bits of wordless song between dissolving bites.

Then she put her joy away. Time to prepare the second act.

She floated upright in the middle of the lake and thought.

It was a strong THING. Stone and mortar, black iron and iron's tougher cousin. Unmasking it would take a very strong croon and a long one—and drain away her strength.

She searched memory once more, a croon for metal things, some way to erase that monster roaring in her Valley. A croon for building, yes, it could be twisted thus and thus and turned toward unbuilding. A croon for shielding, yes ah yes, turn it thus and thus and thread it in the other. Yes. Undo the THING, undo the disease that made the THING, the Talking Beasts, the Toolmakers. Clean the island of them all. Let them rot and feed the beasts and the plants, instead of feeding on them. YES!

She thought some more. Yes. Let them feed ME. She had to be strong and fish wouldn't do it. She needed blood.

The Ouloud sat beneath the flume and watched poison gush into the lake, watched the gush die to a trickle then a few drops. Subduing her fury, she fluted a summoning croon, calling one of the Beast workers swarming at the THING, calling him to come to her, come, come.

He came from the trees, fighting her with every step, trying to escape the iron hold of the croon and to scream for aid from others of his kind. She blocked that easily. They were tougher than the other beasts, but they had no croons to protect them, no skill at Shaping except

with their hands and that was weak, so weak.

He was afraid, the sharpness of that fear gave a dark pungency to the rich meaty smell that rolled off him.

She leaned forward eagerly, tongue altering to hollow needle. Humming with pleasure, she pressed her lips against his neck, pierced the blood channel beneath the tough resilient skin and drank. As the link between them intensified, she pulsed to the beat of his heart. She drained him, rested a moment with her lips against his cooling skin, then withdrew her tongue and let the husk fall away.

"Ouloud."

The Ouloud looked lazily at the female Beast who'd come without being summoned. She was sated for the moment; she didn't want nor need more blood. Then she stiffened. There was something about this one, like a perfume remembered from long ago. Something . . . . "Ou-loo," she cooed. She held up a hand, the fingers changing to claws, dark and hard as horn, one forefinger left pale and straight; she pointed at the ground, waggled her finger impatiently. There was time now while the blood worked in her, readied her for the Unmaking. Time to taste for that perfume, to summon that memory.

4

Tassin.

The Rik Toja Apekojira looked down at the rumpled bed and the pile of needlework dumped in the middle of it; the early sun slanted in through the small window and touched to life a half-finished warbler moth. He reached down, touched it; the threads were silky soft.

Tassin. The word was a wound in him.

Namiwi stood with her head thrown back, temper in the arch of her nostrils, the line of her mouth; her eyes were red from the lacha weed and her hands trembled. "The door was locked," she said. "I was asleep. The whore slithered out some other way. Your kurekure, she was snoring so loud, a herd could walk over her."

"Find her." *Tassin.* He bled inside. He would not let her see it.

Moriawha bent over the basin, chanted at the oil-filmed water.

The film shivered, swirled, then smoothed out and a pale image formed. *Tassin rode up a red-dirt road on a weary grey gelding, weary herself. On one side of her, the creek, on the other, the twin rails of that tram that brought ingots down from the smelter to the steel mill he'd built on the coast.*

"Who is she going to?" *Tassin.* "Show him to me."

Moriawha blew across the basin, chanted again.

When the film cleared, Toja cursed. It wasn't a man but a Thing. *Tassin.*

Taseachan lay on his face in the dust and straw.

The Rik Toja Apekojira took the shotgun and shotbag from the Kapen. Tassin. "He was careless and tried to cover himself." He broke the shotgun, plugged in two shells. "Kill him and bring me the roan. Kapen Atoatan, I want four from the Ka-eera following me. Five minutes." He ignored the sounds of the strangling Huanin, swung into the saddle and sent the roan clattering out of the stable. Tassin.

5

Tassin kicked her feet from the stirrups, clutched at the saddle horn and let herself tilt sideways until she fell off, wrenching her hands from the leather but not before she broke the worst of the fall.

The croon touched her again, cool, impersonal. It wasn't calling her, it was just there. She used it like a guide rope and walked along the lakeshore until she saw the flume and the Ouloud sitting under it.

Shimmering in a sunlit halo of drips from the flume, the Ouloud's body was slender and delicate. Long white cilia fine as spun glass quivered about her thin, high-cheeked face. Stone-colored eyes stared at her.

"I came to tell you . . . ."

"Ou-looo." The Ouloud pressed her finger across her lips, then pointed at the ground again.

"Fitha Spog." Tassin lowered herself awkwardly to her knees, eased her legs around and got herself seated. "Ouloud."

The Ouloud's crinkled round mouth pursed tighter, she began to hum.

"No!" Tassin held up a hand, palm out. "No. I came to tell you, it isn't us. It isn't the Huanin who did this. Leave us alone."

The Ouloud looked from the body crumpled by her feet to Tassin. She shrugged as if to say it's all the same.

Tassin clenched her fists, her temper up. "The Huanin belong to the land as much as you, Ouloud cun-na. You can kill me for saying it but then you'll kill me tomorrow if not today and what's a day more or less?"

"Oo-lou," the Ouloud sang. "Greet you, Talking Beast. Come here, give me blood."

Tassin gasped. "Ah-weh ah-weh, I will not," she said forcefully. "Walk to my own funeral, you're saying? It's kicking and yelling I plan to go, not meek as a mewling ewe lamb. I could be lying in a warm bed now, with whores fetching my tea and an ugly big man kissing my toes. Instead I wore my tail bone down till my neck sits on my rump, coming up here to argue my life from you."

"Ou-lou," the Ouloud sang. "Come here Beast, give me blood."

"Beast I am not. I am Huanin. I am Tassin. Give me my name."

"Ou-Lou," the Ouloud cooed. She stretched out her hands. "Come here, Tas-sin. Give me blood, Ahradda, take healing from me." She trilled her laughter. "For your tailbone."

Tassin stared at her, astonished. Ahradda. SHE names me Ahradda. Ah-weh ah-weh, that's for thinking about another day. "So it's a trade you're offering. That's a different thing altogether." She squared her shoulders, brushed her hands together and took a short step toward the Ouloud. Still reluctant, but driven by a combination of curiosity and desperation, she rested her palms on the Ouloud's waiting hands.

Warm flesh touched cool, exciting Tassin to her heart's core, stirring her in ways no lover ever had, not even Tonn at the height of her passion for him.

6

Cool flesh touched warm, exciting the Ouloud in ways she had forgot as the years slid past since the last Ahradda had come to her; the hunger grew in her for the sharing, and she forgot the THING roaring and banging up the slope from her.

She touched Tassin's hair; the soft strands clung to her fingers, curled about them. She shivered with pleasure. She slid questing fingers along Tassin's neck, the flesh so soft, so firm, so warm and full of life. She gentled the

Change

nervous Ahradda with a low and unintrusive croon, kept the soft touch moving until she felt Tassin sag against her.

She bent closer, touched her lips to the neck. Her tongue changed, hardened, curling over to make the hollow needle that channelled the blood into her throat.

The Ahradda murmured drowsily as the Ouloud pierced the artery at the side of the neck. Her eager delight passed through the link, waking an answering pleasure in Tassin which returned along the link with the rich red alien blood, the feedback lifting them both into a spiralling climb toward a shared explosion of joy.

Reluctantly the Ouloud pulled her head away. "Oooo-louuu Ahhhraaadda," she sang. "Now you, now you."

Tassin blinked, still half dazed. "What?"

"Drink of me." The Ouloud lifted a hand filled with opalescent gel drawn from glands in her wrist. "Oo-lou," she sang.

Tassin bent until her lips touched the gel. She began licking it up, her tongue moving faster and faster, caressing the Ouloud's cool flesh.

When the gel was gone, Tassin lifted her head, smiled lazily, then stretched and groaned with pleasure. She got to her feet, marvelling at how easily she lifted her bulky body, at how thoroughly her exhaustion had been banished. "A wonder and a joy, you are you are, a blessing, Cun-nah." She smiled, a broad three-corner thing that warmed the Ouloud head to foot. Then she winced as another chain of cars came down from the mine, squealing and knocking together, rumbling as they offloaded their rock into the crushers.

The Ouloud got to her feet, took the Ahradda's hand, drew Tassin tight against her. "Ooo-lou," she sang. "Sing with me, Ahradda, it is time . . . ."

She began a high whining croon that tore from her throat and made her cilia jerk and shudder. Behind her the water came roaring against the rocks, great waves twice her height racing in successive lines across the lake. Air whirled about them in a vortex that whipped violently through the trees and lifted sand and debris in a rising tide that blanked out everything around them. The air in the whorl's eye hummed and thickened. The stone shifted under their feet, alive and unstable.

With a last howl torn from her straining throat, the Ouloud loosed the Unmaking she had shaped.

And the mine and the miners in it were not.

And the iron cars were not.

And the rails and ties were not.

And the crusher shuddered and screamed and was not.

And the smelter cracked and broke into dust and even the dust was not.

The air hung motionless. The trees stood motionless. Branches arched, leaves caught in mid-flutter. The lake water was frozen in serried peaks. The earth waited . . . .

The Ouloud felt the moment burst within her, darkness splintering into light, the light shrinking to a vibrating dot. The trees shivered and groaned, the lake fell in on itself and came finally to its usual soft lap-lapping, the earth rumbled and shifted as it settled back to its heavy sleep.

7

Tojo rode from under the trees, the roan lathered and stumbling. He pulled him up, sat there staring at the Ouloud and Tassin.

Tassin blinked from her daze. For a moment she was both Huanin and Ouloud and didn't understand who or what he was. Then she knew he was Toja come for her. He shifted. Come for her with a shotgun in his hands.

She pulled free from the Ouloud. "Go," she cried, "get away. He'll kill you."

"Ah-raaa-ou-lou?"

She started to push the Ouloud into the water, but she was too late.

The shotgun coughed; the Ouloud's head came apart.

Tassin screamed and fainted, falling across Ouloud's body, crushing it to a smear on the stone.

8

She woke in her own bed with Moriawha glowering down at her. "What did you think you were doing, kow?"

Tassin turned her head away. She remembered the Ouloud and felt a great emptiness, a grief that nothing would assuage.

Moriawha slapped her, leaving a red print on her face. "You don't turn away from me, whore. And you're not getting out of this bed alone until the boy is born. You hear me?"

Tassin looked past her and said nothing.

Moriawha lifted her hand, then shrugged. "You don't matter," she said. "Nothing you do matters any more. You're for the strangler's noose when you've done your job. The Tuakais alone know how you'd contrive to corrupt the boy if you were allowed to live and give him suck. Even your milk would poison him."

"There's a guard outside the door," Moriawha went on. "He'll stop you if you try to leave. There's a chamber pot under the bed, use it when you need to. We'll feed you well and treat you tenderly, no fear, it's the boy we're tending. Well?"

Tassin looked past her and said nothing.

Moriawha scowled, shook her head and left.

One day passed, then another.

Late in the third night, when the full moon shone silvergilt through her window, painting an image of the new iron grating across the coverlet on her bed, Tassin felt a croon grow within her, a song without words, tiny, silent, vibrating inside her bones.

At first she didn't understand.

She listened.

Then she knew.

It was the Daughter Within. Forced prematurely from the Ouloud, it had crept inside her body, nestled against Toja's son.

It was growing in her, feeding on Toja's son, taking his place.

She smiled into the dark, content.

Toja aimed for the Ouloud and killed his son instead.

She lay quiet a while, savoring the irony, listening to the Song of the Daughter Within.

Then she began planning her escape.

❧ *Jo Clayton*

A Swim with a Shark

by Robert L.Collins

BRAD HAMANN

Tara was not in a happy mood when the stranger approached her. She knew he wasn't from the village; one, his clothes were a bit too fine; and she didn't recognize his face.

"You're the wizard, right?"

She rolled her eyes and heaved a sigh. She repeated her standard speech for strangers. "Yes, I am. Don't let my age fool you. I'm Tara, the lone wizard in this part of the county. What service are you in need of?" She could feel it was going to be one of those days when she wished she was a farm girl.

"Well, I'm not so much interested in magical help, as in some information."

"Information? "

"I was wanting to know if there were any card players or gamblers in these parts." He smiled a toothy grin. "The name's Justin, and I run card games, dice games, any sort of game you'd want to wager on. I can assure you my games are ethical, legal, and fair. And that my fees are nominal."

A smile crept across Tara's face.

A Swim with a Shark

"Well, Wager Man, I'm afraid you're out of luck. This part of the county is short of money at the moment. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got quite a lot of people to help."

"Hold on," he said, grabbing her arm. "Why is everyone short of cash? The crops look healthy."

Her smile wilted. "We are short of cash because of Master Walden Horton and his Wagon of Elixirs."

"Not the Walden Horton heading up to Eddington? I passed him on the road; seemed a nice enough chap."

"Oh, really? Well, Mister Gambler, that toad sold all these people some of his potions. Potions that turned out to be as useful as mud! The only good thing is that no one's taken ill."

"Well, I am truly sorry."

"Thank you, sir. Now if you'll excuse me?" She walked around him brushed some of her brown hair out of her eyes, and almost knocked over her hat. It was one of those days.

The tall man turned and said, "Excuse me for asking, but what would you say if I told you I might be able to get all that money back?"

Her back straightened. She purposely strode toward him. "Did you say you could get all the money back?"

"Well, I said I might. But it shouldn't be too hard."

"I thought you said you were ethical, legal, and fair?"

"Well, I am. But you have to know what's unfair, if you want to know what's fair, don't you?"

She was glad to have his help, but she was even more glad to have him sitting down while they planned their course of action. She was a short young woman, and felt uneasy with tall men, especially this tall dandy of a man.

"Now, you're sure the potions were useless? Then how can you be sure he isn't, as we say back home, selling you a tumbleweed field, for a good reason? Maybe his mother's sick, and he needs to hire a powerful cleric."

"Oh, I know all right. I went on a little astral trip. I came back after he told some chesty wench he wanted to stay with her for a couple of weeks."

The man brushed his blond moustache with a finger. "Well, that certainly sounds bad. Hmmm. Do you know how long he's staying?"

"No. But he took quite a lot. I'd guess he'd stay a week, at least."

"Not if the mob was after him."

She sighed. "No. These folks are upset, but harvest is coming soon. They can't go running off after some deceitful alchemist, they've got too much to do."

"Then he's going to stay awhile," Justin nodded. "Well, my dear magician, this gives us a chance, but we'll need to move quickly. Is there some way we can get to Eddington in a hurry?"

"Oh, I think I know a way," she said, looking off to her left into space.

"Fine, then. The sooner we get started, the better."

Tara took comfort at the look on Justin's face. It was clear he didn't enjoy standing in a dark forest late at night. She didn't, either, but more out of a dislike of the cold than out of fear. She stomped her feet, rubbed her arms, and asked lightly, "Like the scenery?"

"Very funny," he snapped.

"Why are you scared? Aren't you a gambling man?"

"Yes, but I don't like violence. Or danger. I'm an honest man, after all."

She shook her head. "Well, don't worry about it. These woods are perfectly safe. Of course, I haven't checked in some time." He glared at her, and she broke out laughing.

"I'm sorry, Justin, but you really ought to look at yourself. You'd think a dragon were nipping at your heels!"

"It might very well be. Look, can you change your appearance?"

"Sure. What for?"

"Turn yourself into a well-to-do city lass."

Tara shrugged and did the illusion. Her hair went from brown to blond, her eyes hazel to green. She gained a few inches in height, and a few pounds in weight. Her gray wizard's robe became a dress of blue, reds, and purples. "How's this?"

"Moderate the dress, and add a little chest." Her lips curled at the latter, but she complied. "That's perfect," he smiled. "Remember that one."

"Don't you like me the way I am?"

"I like her just the way she is," a new voice opined. Justin leaped and put a hand over his heart. Tara rolled her eyes and walked over to the voice.

"It's about time, Arcada," she said to the white pegasus that wandered into the clearing.

"Please don't do that again," he begged, gasping. "I have a weak heart."

"Sorry."

"Arcada, this is Justin. He and I need to get to Eddington in a hurry."

"Oh, I see."

"It's not that," she said, slapping the beast. "This alchemist sold some useless potions. Justin and I will try to get the villagers' money back."

"Oh. Well, that sounds noble enough. Hop on."

"Uh, Arcada," Justin said, "drop me off close to the alchemist's tavern, then drop her off a few streets away?"

"What's the matter? Don't like the little wizard?"

"Just do it," he ordered.

"Whatever you say, good sir," Arcada bowed.

Justin timed it so he walked by the card table just as a man got up to leave. Master Walden Horton saw him, and called to him. "Say, you. Didn't I meet you on the road to that village, Willowbend, earlier today?"

"Yeah, but I decided to turn back."

"Uh huh. Those little burgs just don't have what a card player like you's looking for. Say, we're now one short, you want in?"

"Sure." Justin sat down. "Poker?"

"That's right." Horton introduced him to the other two players, then dealt the cards while Justin put his coins on the table.

Justin guessed that Horton wasn't a real cheater at cards. His hand wasn't perfect, but there was plenty to work with. And when he exchanged three, he was sure. No shifty dealer worth his pack would inadvertently given a new player a straight flush on the first hand. When the game was over, and Justin saw what the others had received, he almost felt guilty about what was to come next. Almost.

"Well, gentlemen, I fear I have too much advantage over you in poker," he said. "Might I suggest a new game? One that I don't play too much?"

"What is it?" Horton asked.

"It's called 'One Last Man.'" He took out his own pack, and put the table's aside. He told them the rules as he dealt: "Seven cards, all at once. Dealer places a bet to start, and he lays down a card. Now, if you have one better, you match his coins, and lay down that card. It goes around to all the players. You can pass, but if you pass more than three times in a row you're out. You can fold at any time. After all four of us have played the first card, the highest one takes half the pot, leaves the rest, and we play the second. You must play

the last card you have, or you fold. Clear? Good. I'll play the first. Ten of clubs, two coppers."

As the second man played, a jack, Tara drifted to the table, in her disguise. Horton went next with an ace, and the last man passed. The game went on this way, with either Justin or Horton winning. Justin sensed that Horton was feeling his way around the new game, and was catching on to the strategy of it. Justin won that game, and readied for a second. The man to Justin's left took his few remaining coins in his hand. "Sorry, fellows, but I'm out."

"Excuse me," a young feminine voice floated over. "I am familiar with that game you're playing. You wouldn't mind if a young lady sat in on a few hands?" They looked up to see a striking young woman standing to Horton's left. She had emerald green eyes, fair hair, a full figure in a rich dress, and a bulging lady's moneybag.

"Of course you may," Horton smiled broadly. "If you're willing to take a risk with us, that is. What's your name, milady?"

"Evangeline," she answered coolly.

"That's a beautiful name, Miss. I'm Horton."

"Pleased to meet you."

"If we can continue," Justin said testily. The others nodded and he delt. He made sure that he slighted both Evangeline's and Horton's hands, and that his was nearly unbeatable. He played it out and won easily.

"Oh, I've lost most of my money," Evangeline sobbed. Justin tried to look mild.

"Say, you cheated us," Horton accused. "You took all her money."

"Oh, I hardly think so," responded Justin. "But it is my deck, and I do know my way around it. Would you object to using the table deck?"

"As long as I can deal."

Horton dealt. And much to the fat man's surprise, he won easily. Evangeline was still out, but he promised to let her take whatever she'd lost out of his earnings. The third man bowed out, and Justin and Horton continued.

Horton's streak continued for two more games. It stunned him, delighted Evangeline, caused a stir among the bar's patrons, and angered Justin. "I know you're an alchemist, but are you a wizard, too?"

"Of course not. I don't know any magic tricks!"

"Guard. Come over here. I want you to watch him, make sure he doesn't use any spells to adjust his hand." The burly soldier nodded, Horton dealt, and a crowd began to gather.

It took the play of one card to set Justin off. "An ace! I can't believe this! Guard, search him."

Horton's eyes bulged. "There's no need for that," he told the armsman.

Then, before his, the guard's, and the other eyes on his side of the table, another ace in his hand turned into a deuce! Horton trembled, stammed, and tried to deny the accusations.

The guard didn't believe him any more than anyone else. "Right, sir, you're coming with me."

Evangeline stood up. "Wait. I don't care what you do to him, but leave me the money. He promised to give me what I'd lost. I'll take that. Give this man what he came with, and give the rest out to the poor in the morning." She took a few coins and gave them to the other man who'd played with them.

"Fine with me, Miss" said the guard.

"Good." She gave Horton the nastiest face she could. "You scoundrel! I would've accepted your charity, had you not cheated. I hope you rot in jail, you lout!" She turned directly away from him and looked at Justin. "I know getting what you came here with is hardly fair, sir, but would you consider escorting me home compensation enough?"

"I would," he replied, offering his arm. "Good night to you all," he said as he and the young lady marched out.

Justin and Tara got back to her home just as the sun was coming up. Spread out on the floor was the night's take, organized into two piles: the taller for the town, the smaller for him. Justin counted up his share and laughed. "Sometimes I like my job."

"I can't believe they fell for it," she said.

"Well, nobody expects someone to lose money to make money. How could you cheat, and lose? You know, I never thought I'd need magic to win a game."

"Oh? Did you ever have to cheat to win?" He looked away, whistled. "Ah, I see. We make a good team, don't we?"

"Oh, uh ... You're not thinking what I think you're thinking, are you?"

At that instant she felt that this had truly been one of those days.

Robert L. Collins

COMING UP ...

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GEORGE BARR

Son of the Sun

by Patricia Shaw Mathews

Stiff in my gold-encrusted trousers and boots, I picked my way through the muck of the bull pen to Glory's stall. Glory tossed his head and snorted, as uncomfortable with the garland around his gilded horns as I was with my ceremonial costume and sword. I dipped a hand into the feed sack held by the High Priest boy and held out the sweet-scented grain to the golden bull.

Glory looked up at me with dark, unreadable eyes, nibbled the grain from my hand, and nuzzled me with his great muzzle. He had never needed a ring through his nose like other bulls; he was mine, and as tame as a lapdog. He was as royal a bull as I was a boy. I could feel the admiration of the crowd like the sun on my shoulders as I led Glory out into the palace square.

A woman started cheering as we entered; another took it up until the whole square rung with it. "Son of the Sun!" My oldest brother Viktor glanced sideways at me and moved his hands together as if to say, *You'll get a swelled head from all this praise, Chris, boy.* He was fourteen, already a young man and a warrior. I, who was only three months younger and had never trained at arms, was still a boy, a child. Sometimes I wondered if I would ever grow up.

Viktor was in full armor and carried our father's second sword. His golden hair and beginnings of a beard gleamed in the sunlight of the square. When they saw him, the people sent up another cheer for their Crown Prince and the armies that followed him to crush the barbarian Nyangan who camped on our borders and ate their enemies' dead.

My youngest brother Jaan edged closer to Glory and tried to pet his muzzle. The bull pulled away; I laid a hand on his nose. "Be nice, Glory. That's a prince, and one day he'll be High Priest." *And a better one than sour old Chador,* I dared not

say out loud. I stroked the bull's muzzle again.

Oh, he was a beautiful bull. They gave him to me when he was just an orphaned baby calf, taken from his dead mother by the knife, with nobody to feed him but me. I milked the other cows who had plenty, and dipped a cloth in the milk for him to suck. When he got a little older, he learned to drink from a golden vessel with a long, narrow spout, and then from a bucket, also of gold. They were both engraved with his name, the signs of the gods, and the sign of our house, the sun-man with twelve golden locks of hair around his beaming face. Prince Glory, Son of the Sun, was his name, just as mine was Prince Christoman, Son of the Sun. "That makes him my brother, doesn't it?" I once asked my father.

He smiled and ruffled my hair, giving me a warm hug. "It does indeed, Chris," he agreed, the harsh lines of worry leaving his face for once, and then returning tenfold.

We were sorely pressed by the Nyangans' raids. It wasn't enough that they stole horses and cattle, or even maidens from the farms. They burned the farms, slaughtered entire caravans, looted our temples, and gave shelter to every outlaw on our western border. They tortured and maimed their prisoners, and ate their dead. When my royal father sent a messenger to them demanding submission, they sent him back in bloody pieces with the one word "No."

The trumpets blew again, and the High Priest beckoned from the top of the temple steps. It seemed to me that Holy Lord Chador enjoyed the ever-increasing sacrifices the gods were demanding these days. One night, when my father sat and talked of the kingdom's affairs over the wine cups and I played by his feet unregarded like the Queen's lapdog, I told him so. My father held me close then. "The eyes of an innocent see more than the ears of the wise ever hear," he quoted, with such pain in his eyes I was afraid to pursue the matter further.

I patted Glory's muzzle again, and gently guided him up the steep temple steps. He and I had rehearsed this time and again. It was my only task, to memorize the Bull Rite perfectly and rear Glory to be the best bull we could give the gods. Together we mounted the steps to the high altar. I stood beside him, praying desperately to the gods for our land and kingdom—and for Glory. "Dear Lord and Lady," I begged them with a boy's earnest innocence, "give him meadows of flowers to romp in, forever green, and the loveliest of cows for his delight."

The High Priest swung back his heavy gold-plated mallet, and with perfect aim, struck Glory between the eyes. He went down without a sound, falling perfectly on the slab as if this, too, had been rehearsed. The people murmured approval at the perfection of the rite. But as Lord Chador slit the bull's throat with his great gold-handled sacrificial knife, Glory looked up at me, his great brown eyes betrayed.

It was unmanly to weep. I lifted my face to the altar and let the rest of the ceremony go by me in a buzz of words and flash and glitter. The bull I had reared from a calf was with the gods, and his soul would play forever in whatever heaven the Lady had ordained for sacrificial bulls. His blood would go into the land to enrich it, and his spirit would guide our armies against the ravaging barbarians. "For the good of our land, " I told myself desperately. "For the good of our people."

But all I could see was Glory's eyes as he went down under the mallet. "You love me," they seemed to say. "And you led me to my death."

I could feel my father's hand on my shoulder as we walked down the temple steps together. My nose was so stuffy it was hard work to breathe, or to contain myself from blowing it. He led me around back to a quiet spot. The smell of roasting beef drifted around the corner into my nostrils. Glory's flesh would go to feed the priests and my father's household tonight, as the flesh of lesser bulls would go to feed the people. Praise to my father's generosity; was some peasant cowherd as sick as I was tonight for the loss of a beast he loved?

"Chris," said the Lord of the Sun, handing me a rag to blow my nose on. "You did well for a boy your age. We know how you loved your brother the bull."

I looked up. There was grey in his golden beard and hair, and his face was heavily lined with worry, fear, and pain. "He loved me, father," I blurted out like a child. "And I betrayed him."

My father smoothed back my hair. "Because you loved him, the gods will be moved to hear us all the more," he said gravely. "If we gave them a common bull from the herd, they'd have no idea what straits we're in. Now they know, because we gave them our best. Of course, I could have taken some peasant's only bull and sacrificed that. But is that a deed worthy of a king? Or even a good man?"

Because I had been thinking that myself, I nodded and laid my head against his shoulder. He put his arm around me. "We bred Glory especially as a gift to the gods," he said, a remote sadness in his voice. "A prince of a bull, hand-reared by a prince of a boy. Desperate times call for the greatest sacrifices. Two sons for the battlefield, and one for the gods."

I nodded. I had always known I was for the gods. Priest of the Bull Rite, a thing unheard-of since the days of my great grandfather. I vowed in my heart I would be a good priest.

My father lifted my chin so I could look into his cold, sad sea-grey eyes, and he into my innocent blue ones. "The eunuch priests of the Corn Maiden give Her what is most precious to every man, that the corn will grow in our fields," he said soberly. "My own sister Inelda went willingly to the tents of the barbarians for the sake of the Kingdom, not knowing whether she would be enthroned, enslaved, or eaten. Your brothers and I ride to war, not knowing whether or not we will come back alive."

I gulped and tried to wipe away my tears. "You're saying I should be glad to give a bull to the gods. What is a bull's life compared to that of your life or my aunt's or my brothers, or any prince's. Is that it?"

He wiped my tears. "No. If you harden your heart to the sacrifice, the gods will harden theirs. I'm saying your heart's blood, your tears, will move the gods to our plight. Weep, Chris. Let the tears flow. Then come eat. Don't let Glory's death be in vain." He hugged me again, such pain on his face I could hardly bear it. "You will wear his hide in the next Bull Rite. Come on, Chris. You have another ritual to learn letter-perfect and another calf to rear."

Reluctantly I went, my gold-crusted sandals clacking across the inlaid stone like the hooves of my pet bull on the terrace of the temple.

It was hard to come to the bull pen again, to look around at all the calves and choose one, knowing he was going to his death. Unable—unwilling—to choose, I wandered back into the courtyard where old Burdos, the

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armsmaster, was giving my brothers lessons. My hurt wanted something to batter against, so when they laid down their wooden swords, I went over to him. "Could I try that, Burdos?" I asked.

Viktor took off his helmet and squatted on the grass beside me. "You know Father said you weren't to be bothered learning things you'll never use, Chris," he said kindly. "You're for the Bull Rite, not the battlefield. And if you take a wound and mar your beauty, Uncle Chador will have all our hides on the tanning rack. I have to learn all sorts of tiresome things; I'm the eldest."

"By three months," I reminded him. Then something came to me, for for the first time. "Burdos," I appealed to the armsmaster, "who was my mother?"

The old veteran ruffled my hair. "Nobody knows that, Chris," he said soberly. "Nobody knows for sure whether or not the King is really your father. He said he was. He said your mother was a great princess, but her name is between him and the gods. Has anyone been taunting you with that, young prince?"

I had to think about that. People teased me, but there was no malice in it. At last I said "They call me a prince and give me the run of the palace, but nobody takes me seriously. I don't have to learn my letters like Jaan and Viktor. I don't have to train at arms like every other boy in the kingdom. I don't have any duties except to raise the sacred bull calf and memorize the rite."

Burdos chewed his lip. "You've a hankering to become a warrior, young prince?" he said at last, looking me over like the bullmaster with the latest crop of calves. "Is that it? Seems to me if I'd had a son with your heart, your imagination, and your build, I'd have put him to the priesthood too. Specially—under the circumstances. Now, I for one don't see what harm it'd do to let you work out with the lads a bit, but orders is orders. I'm sorry, lad."

"A King can't be too careful," I heard an older boy say behind my back. Chador's oldest son. "Give him a sword, and next thing you know, he'll be wanting the throne for himself."

Chador's son meant me to hear that. I knew it as surely as I knew the sun was high in the heavens, and hot. But I also knew he meant no malice by it. He was trying to warn me of somethings. What?

In one of the gardens, a child was reciting his letters. I stood in the gate and listened as he started, haltingly, to read a tale. When he came to the end of the tablet, he looked up. "Prince," he said. "Do I read well?"

I blushed hot red. "I don't know," I confessed. "I never learned my letters. I'm not supposed to," I realized, anger flooding me. Was I a prince, or a lapdog?

He was my age or younger, with a huge red birthmark splashed across his cheek. His face was delicate and his eyes blue like mine; he wore a long plain robe, like a scholar. "I'm not supposed to, either," he confided.

The pain of the look in Glory's dying eyes faded beneath my curiosity. "Why not?"

The reader giggled. "I'm only a girl," he - she - confessed. "If I learn to read, my womb will shrivel up and no man will want me. But look at me. Do you think any man would want me now? Besides, I hate the way Father's apprentices look at me." She put out a hand. It was a small hand, slender, ringless, ink-stained. "Chandra, Chador's daughter."

I took her hand. "Christoman, Son of the Sun. Chandra, do you think you could teach me?" I said, feeling as bold and wicked as a raider come to swoop down on a border farmstead. I couldn't—shouldn't learn the use of arms. But why not learn my letters? Chador would tell me a priest of the Bull Rite didn't need them, but what harm would it do? Suddenly I wanted to defy old Chador more than anything in the world. "Please?" I begged. "It'll be our secret. And maybe," I felt a burst of genius, "you could tell me more about the Bull Rites. They don't tell me everything at once, only what I need to know each time. Who was the last Priest of the Bull Rite? Did he raise his own calf? Did it bother him when he had to sacrifice it?"

Chandra raised her eyes timidly from the scroll in her lap. "You promise to keep it a secret?" she asked shyly, looking around as if for spies.

"Promise." I gave her my hand. "My oath."

We had to be careful. Chandra wasn't supposed to be reading and neither was I. I didn't think we were supposed to be meeting in the garden, either. I'd heard enough palace gossip to know what everyone would say if we were caught. Had my mother been a palace lady caught meeting the Son of the Sun in the garden? What happened to her after I was born?

I went to the Queen's quarters to ask. She rose from her embroidery frame to give me a hug and a sweetmeat, then said "What brings a big boy like you to the womens' quarters, Chris?" She glanced significantly at the youngest and prettiest of her maids, and I blushed hot. Viktor had explained wenching to me, but so far, my first fumbling efforts had been more uncomfortable than delightful.

My royal sisters were at their own lessons, and who cared what maidservants thought or said? "My lady," I said as she gave me a hug, "whatever became of the woman who bore me?"

The Queen looked at me gravely. "She's dead, Chris. She was taken by the barbarians and is certainly dead. Your father brought you to me, your birth-blood still on you, and begged on his knees that I foster you. Remember?" She smiled at me fondly. "I suckled you with Viktor, big boy that he was, and the palace ladies teased me about having twins three months apart. I never heard her name. I'm sorry."

She was lying. I suddenly knew she was lying, and that the truth would be more pain than I could bear. How did I know that? I tried to meet her eyes, and realized I had to conceal my knowledge—what little I had—for my very life.

Coming from the Queen's quarters, I passed the boy who had spoken to me on the arms field. He turned his head away from me; not before I saw the black eye and swollen mouth, the stripes across his back. Someone had beaten him cruelly enough to scar him for life. I didn't think Burdos had done it.

Frightened, I ran for Chandra's garden. The white stone bench was empty. From high in a peach tree above, I heart "Pssst! Chris!" Chandra beckoned to me. I dumped my cloak on the bench and skinnied on up the tree. She was perched high on a branch, scroll in hand.

"Father called all the apprentices and my brothers together last night," she whispered, her hand tight and sweaty on the scroll. "He warned them

never to speak to you of what lies ahead, or their bones would hold up the next bridge your father built. Then he drove the lesson in with whip and fist. I listened from the stairwell and nobody saw me. Father's a great wizard, but he never, ever sees me." Her bright blue eyes gleamed with triumph. "I'm glad."

"Did he mean it? About their bones holding up the bridge?" I asked idly. The armsmaster's grandfather remembered the time we built Gontor Bridge and they buried the bones of a convicted felon underneath it, to placate the demons that lived in the rapids north of here.

Chandra scowled up at the sun shining through the light-green new leaves. "They used to do it. Bury a man under every temple cornerstone. There's one under the palace now, nobody knows where."

"A murderer," I guessed. "A parricide or a rebel. How long ago was that?" For it suddenly occurred to me that time stretched on forever, back into the mists of legend and forward to the end of my life, when I was old and had a long white beard.

Chandra examined her ink-stained fingers. "A hundred and fifty years ago, my father says. But they could do it again if they need to."

"What lies ahead?" I went back to what she'd said before, rolling the words around in my mouth, trying to taste them, trying to find some sense of what I'd be when I was old. Would I have sons? Some priests lived solitary, with neither wife nor child. What about Chandra? If they made me marry, I wouldn't mind having her to wife. What did lie ahead? And why was it such a secret?

If I asked anyone in the palace, they'd tell me I had another bull calf to raise, and the bullmaster was getting impatient with my moping after Glory. I had another Bull Rite to learn, this one far more complicated than the last. It called for a youth, not a boy; the bullmaster had dropped hints that part of it involved lying with a maiden. That frightened me a little, eager though I was to learn the mysteries of manhood. Beyond that, nobody said. Probably still another Bull Rite. Maybe I'd get the hide of my second pet calf to wear.

How many hides could one man use? I tried to remember if I'd seen a priest around who had a collection of bullhide robes. I couldn't. I hunkered down onto the tree branch and pulled a sweet cake out of my pocket. "Did you ever find out what the last Bull Priest did? Nobody ever told me."

Chandra's face was white. "That was one of the things nobody's supposed to tell. Father said he'd kill anyone who ever brought it up. I'll bet it has something to do with why you're not allowed to learn the warrior's trade, though."

I scoffed and curled my bare feet around the tree branch, sandals in my hand. "I know why that is," I informed her loftily. "They're afraid I'd march against Viktor and Jaan some day. Other princes have done it. Not that I ever, ever would." I held out my hand for her tablet and stylus. "Show me how to make my name. Please?"

My new bull's name was Radiance, and he was even finer than Glory. I couldn't bring myself to love him as much, remembering the look in Glory's eyes when we sacrificed him. The bullmaster noticed it, and called me over that evening. "Chris," he said solemnly, "your sorrow is bad for your bull calf, who expects you to love him as he loves you."

I hung my head. "I'm sorry, sir. It's just—I can't stop thinking about it. Glory went to the gods without consent, without knowing what he was doing. He thinks I sold him to the butcher, I know he does."

The bullmaster took my hand. "It's better that he went unknowing, Chris. He went without fear, in love. Don't you think he knows you grieve for him now? The gods have told him what you did and why. Well he knows you loved him, and he forgives you."

I looked up at his sober, loving brown eyes above his short brown beard and mustache. "Armenad," I said, greatly bold, "Why have I never met another Priest of the Bull Rite? Why am I the only one who has ever done this, except the High Priest?"

Armenad scratched his rough brown thatch of hair. "Well, lad, it's like this. The way they told it to me, we only do this when the need of the kingdom is great. Oh, the High Priest'll sacrifice a good bull every feast day. On the Great High Feasts, the king'll do the job. Your Da hand-reared the bull for his king-making, just as you did Glory. But there comes a time when things are looking dire for the kingdom, and so—you. And the bulls. For the first time in a hundred and fifty years, we have a Priest of the Bull Rite, born and bred to the job. D'ye understand me, lad?" He looked at me anxiously, as if he were afraid he'd already said too much.

"I . . . I think so." I thanked him solemnly and went to make friends with my new bull, but my heart wasn't in it. A hundred and fifty years. I didn't know why that felt so dreadful, as if the temple bells were already tolling my life away. It just did.

It was still early spring, but the barbarians were massing on our Western border as if they had no crops to plant. My father's messengers came and went more often, and he paced the floor, his face deeply lined. He looked at me with a desperate hope I'd done nothing to earn. Guilty, I redoubled my efforts to learn the new Bull Rite properly and to treat my new calf Radiance with all the love I could lavish on him.

My heart felt numb. Frightened, I raised my face to the gods. "It's my fault I can't love your new bull as I should," I pleaded with them. "Don't turn your hearts from us because of my failings. Please save us from the barbarians," I faltered, knowing myself no warrior, "I would give my life." I pictured a noble and hopeless last stand with what few weapons I had, prevailing at the last minute through courage, faith, and—maybe—with the help of my bull calf. That was enough to make me turn my face back to the chore of tending and loving him as I should.

Trust my brother Viktor to notice something was wrong, even as the armies prepared for battle. He caught me coming from the garden one day and said, "They say your heart's not fully in your ritual, Chris, lad. The bullmaster thinks you're moping for old Glory, but —" he looked at me keenly. "Is it a girl?"

I nodded. Chandra was a girl.

He laughed and slapped me on the back. "Well! My baby brother's coming into manhood, just in time." He had on his practice armor, but a real sword. He took it out and polished it, sitting on the bench while he tried to pry the name of the lucky maiden from me. Then he sighed deeply. "The barbarians are on their way to Togoth, Chris."

I gasped. "It's planting season! Would even the barbarians go to war then? Or are they counting on the Togoth granaries to feed them? If so, they won't get anything this early in the season!"

Viktor looked at me oddly. "You'd better not let Lord Chador hear you thinking like a prince, Chris. Though I never did understand what was so all-fired important about keeping you

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ignorant of everything but the Bull Rite. Hey, you're my brother; when I'm King, I'll find a priestly office for you full of honor, and a noble wife as well. If you want to be my counselor, I can arrange that, too."

I had a lump in my throat that went far beyond the love and kindness I'd been showered with all my life. "Thanks, Viktor. Togoth's on the Western border, isn't it?"

"It didn't use to be," Viktor said darkly. "The year before we were born, the Western border used to run clear as far as the Largoth Hills. Then the barbarians took Largoth City and laid it waste, and you don't want to hear what they did to the people when they took it. They hung the City Fathers up by their balls and roasted them over an open fire; they put all the men and boys and mothers to the sword; they raped all the virgins, then carried them off as slaves; they . . . . "

He filled my ears with horrors, then rose and added "They say the barbarians leave planting to their women, to free the men for war. We can't do that, so we'll be in sorry shape this year. Pray that Togoth stands, Chris, or else the entire province will fall. If that happens, the barbarians will be in the interior before the cat can lick the cream from her face. Then, well, I'd kill the ladies before letting them endure slavery." He clasped me on the shoulder. "Speak to the gods well for us, little priest-brother."

I shuddered with the atrocity stories. "I will," I vowed. That was the last time I spoke with him. He rode off to war the next day, proud in his shining armor, his warhorse prancing in the dust, his legions behind him. My heart was sick within me. I feared I would never see him again in this life, and I turned back to the bull pen and Bull Rite with renewed determination.

Little Radiance followed me around and drank from his golden pail just like Glory, took grain from my hand, and soon stole into the numb place in my heart that Glory had occupied. The only difference was, Chandra and her scrolls now filled it, too. "Maybe I am meant to be a priest," I decided, laying aside a tale of that long-ago battle.

"Chris." She had kicked off her sandals and lay on the grass, hands under her head. I could see the budding outline of breasts under her robe. "You know, if a woman touches the scrolls of a wizard, his spells will come to nothing. Don't you?"

I didn't, but it made sense. There were times of the month the dairymaids dared not go past the cheesemaking, and other times the brewing maids dared not approach the vats of beer. "What a fine way to put a stop to evil magic," I said idly.

She nodded as if she were way ahead of me. "My brother warned me never to touch a scroll of good magic. Do you know the barbarians sacrifice people the way we do bulls? It said so in the scroll of the Evil Deeds of the Nyangan. My brother let me dust it; nobody wants Nyangan spells to work. They even kill their King when times are bad."

I thought of the father who loved me even when he was worried sick for the kingdom's sake, dying under the sacrificial knife, and shuddered again. Was there no end to their bloodthirsty evil? "I'm glad you told me," I said, eager to hear more. "What other wickedness do they do?"

She looked up through the leafy canopy of the fruit trees around us, chewing on a grass. "There's a tale of a prisoner they took to torture, but the Beloved Woman took pity on him and adopted him as her own son to raise. The Beloved Woman is the king's sister, and the nobles always choose the king from among her sons."

"But that means," I turned pale with abomination, "that the King has to . . . . has to . . . . "

"No," Chandra shook her head. It was a small head, finely formed. I could still see the birthmark, but that hadn't mattered for weeks. "They marry her to the finest of soldiers of common rank and raise him to a special office. But even in our lands, the King's sister's son used to be the next King, and King Sarthon really did do that with his sister. The scroll says he went to her room at night in the shape of a white bull and lay with her. The gods sent them a little boy with the head and parts of a bull to punish them. Which isn't fair. I mean, she didn't have anything to do with it. Did she?"

"It must have hurt awfully, giving birth," I suggested. I couldn't imagine a woman having a calf and not dying of it.

"They say she died of it," Chandra said with passionate anger, rolling over. "But they say he just looked like any other little boy, until he grew up. then he turned into a bull completely and started eating grass and chasing cows."

"What happened to him then?" I asked, rolling up the scroll with the battle on it.

Chandra frowned. "The scroll says he went to his father and asked to be sent to the gods where he belonged. So, weeping in sorrow, his father took him to the altar and sacrificed him as we do the bulls. Well, after all, that's what he was! And besides, that was a hundred and fifty years ago."

"When we had the last Bull Priest." A dark cloud settled in my stomach and froze. "Only now you said it was the King," I argued. "Which was it? Chandra, this is important. If I'm to be the next Bull Priest, I have to know these things.!"

"Well, I just don't know!" she answered back, scrambling to her feet. "I'll find out! But it's getting more and more dangerous. If my father finds out I've been reading his scrolls, he'll—he'll sell me to the barbarians for a slave. You know what they do to girl slaves? They tie them outside the tent like a dog and every man who passed her by has to, has to . . . . you know. Like in a Temple of the Bride. Only a horrid mockery of it."

My face went white as I remembered what my foster-mother the Queen had said. "My mother was taken by the barbarians. Would they do that to a Princess?"

"Maybe they liked her and the war chief made her his wife," Chandra tried to reassure me. "Or maybe she's dead. Your grandfather had to give Princess Inelda to the barbarians to keep them from sacking Largoth, years and years ago."

I got to my feet in haste. "They sacked Largoth anyway."

"Maybe Princess Inelda met your mother. Maybe they got together and escaped."

"They're only women!" I protested.

Chandra tucked the scroll under her arm and lifted her nose in the air. "Among the barbarians," she said loftily, "the women train at arms too, and are even fiercer than the men. And none of them would ever sneak into his sister's room and rape her in the form of a bull, then say the gods were punishing her, and sacrifice his own son and nephew. Even if he had started eating grass and chasing cows!"

She had a pretty little nose, and rosebud lips under it. The gods moved me to take her by the waist then and drop a kiss on those lips and jest "Moo! I'm a bull and you're a cow . . . ."

Then we both fell apart as the frozen cloud in my stomach turned to hard ice, like the lakes in deep winter. "No. It's not the same thing at all," I cried, my soul sick into death and a million miles away. "I'm the Bull Priest, not the bull. I'm a body, not a calf. I don't have a bull's head."

"Or a bull's parts," she teased, with a quick glance.

I started shaking. "I'm mortal. Human. I eat and drink and piss and ... besides, Father would never." The black cloud in me set up a howl to the gods and all the devils of the barbarians. They had tried to tell me. Oh, sweet gods above and below, everyone had tried so hard to tell me what lay ahead and why.

"... he couldn't. He wouldn't. Not lie with his sister and not send his son to the altar. Not unless I really did turn into a bull. And then I wouldn't like it any better. I know the bulls don't like it. Of course, if it means saving the kingdom . . . . "

Chandra sat down on the grass shaking, head in her hands. "Do you think wickedness would save the kingdom?" she quavered. "The maiden priestesses say the gods are good, and moved by goodness. Except the evil gods we shouldn't deal with anyway, for fear we'll become as them."

I couldn't see Chador listening to any maiden priestesses. It was hard enough for him to listen to the King. He liked sacrifice, the bigger, the better. It wasn't greed. He didn't keep any of the sacrifices beyond his due. He sent them to the god and enjoyed doing it: animals, fruits and flowers, fine vases and statues ... oh, he'd love the sacrifice of a King's son. He'd love the sacrifice of a king's sister's virtue. I got up and backed away. I had finally seen the face of evil.

I couldn't sleep that night. I got up and paced the floor of my room, looking at the frescoes on the wall in the pale moonlight. Tonight I felt like the stag at bay beside my wardrobe wall.

The Queen knew. That was what she had found too painful to tell me. I had come from another woman's womb, but she had nursed from her own breasts. How could she face sending me forth to die? I thought of the women and boys slaughtered during the Sack of Largoth, the maidens dragged off to be staked out in front of the tents like dogs. What did they do with the little girls too young to be called maidens? Eat them? Sell as slaves to work until they were big enough to stake out? Or, I shivered, raise them as daughters of the tent, then, suddenly, make dogs of them?

I knew now how Glory felt. Those whom I loved, betrayed me to death. I dared not let anybody see my face; what I knew was written all over it.

Suppose the choice were my death or the spoiling of the city and the palace. Suppose it were my sisters tied to those tents, my mother and brothers impaled on barbarian swords, my city in flames. Though I wouldn't miss old Chador.

I was no warrior, but I would have given my life to stand before them with a sword to prevent it. How was this different?

My father appeared in the doorway, a powerful shadow, his shoulders as heavy as if he carried the entire kingdom on them. "You know," he said abruptly, sitting on the edge of my bed as he often had when I was a child.

His eyes were so full of pain I could hardly bear to watch. Still, my heart raged within me. "You could have consulted me," I stormed at him. "You could have asked. You know I would give me life for the Triple Kingdom. The lowest of peasant lads would die to save his farm, and I'm a prince. Aren't I?"

He met my eyes squarely. "You're a prince, and nobler than your birth or breeding. I tried to keep you innocent, so you would go to the sacrifice without fear. But boys grow into men, and start to think. I had a hundred signs of that this spring. I had no heart to stop you, but I dared not tell you. It was too heavy a burden for young shoulders."

I thought of Chandra's rage against King Sarthon's use of his sister, and swallowed as hard as I could with a dry throat. "Did my aunt Inelda—my mother—know?"

He sighed heavily. "Not the whole. It was too heavy a burden to lay upon the shoulders of a maid. She went consenting to my bed for the sake of the land, then asked to be sent to the barbarians. I haven't heard from her since, and well that is. What could we say to each other? Son, know I loved you."

I swallowed the unmanly tears that threatened to rise up in my throat. "As I loved Glory. As they want me to love Radiance. Sir," I stood up in a sudden burst of rage, "Whose idea was this? Not yours. It has Lord Chador's filthy fingerprints all over it."

My father rose with me. "Thinking, were you? Or was someone talking treason to you?"

"For the love of the gods, Father!" I burst out; "You've seen Chador's face when some poor widow gives the last glass dish from her dowry to be smashed on the altar to make bindings for a new temple block. Who do I need to talk to but him? I've seen him day in and day out. Don't you think I know him by now?"

My father ran a strand of the cover's fringe through his sword-calloused fingers. "He was the son of my father's sister," he said thoughtfully. "In the olden days before we built this city, he would have been King in my place. When we were boys, he'd play at sacrifice, and once he took a puppy from my hound bitch—he wasn't playing that day."

"Then you do understand, Father," I said eagerly.

He touched my hand lightly. "I understand that a gift promised to the gods cannot be taken back. I understand that your life and mine are nothing, weighed against the life of our land. You will go to the sacrifice consenting, like the brave lad you've shown yourself, and I will not come back from this battle alive." He looked up at the full, pale moon shining in through the window. "Nor do I wish to. But the land will live, and that's the main thing."

"Under who, Father?" I asked, cold reason driving out fear and anger both. "Viktor? The gods told me he's not coming back either. Jaan? He's younger than I am, which makes Chador his Regent. Do you smell of wolf in the sheepfold, Father?"

"The gods have spoken," he said, from fifteen years of such sick despair I marvel that he lived with it. "Neither you nor I can change it."

"Gods? Or demons?" I challenged him.

I lunged for his sword unthinking; it was in his hand faster than I could move. His face was even more ravaged now.

"Don't try conclusions with a warrior trained and bred, Chris. I feared your courage was not equal to the task. I'm sorry to see I was right. Oh, great gods above and below, do you think I relish this? But neither will I let private passions and my own faint heart stand in the way of what must be done." Tears wet his bearded cheeks. "Give me your hands to be bound, or give me your word."

I drew in a deep breath and searched my heart. Oh, yes, fear was there, raging like a starved wolf among my guts. But even stronger was a deep

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anger at my kinsman Chador for putting my father through fifteen years of agony. The will of the gods? Or of devils? To save the land? Or to make Chador King-Regent? Who would be next to die? Would Chador revive the custom of sending the King to the altar next, and send my little brother after me?

I had never learned the craft of arms. But if I must die, it would be at the hands of the father who had loved me, not the kinsman who loved only human pain. I raised my head, still beardless. "I can give you neither, Father," I said desperately, and ran to throw myself on his sword.

His head jerked backwards as if a cowhand had snared a bull in his rope. "Pssst!" came a voice from on top of the wardrobe. I looked up to see little Chandra perched on the massive chest, her small body jammed into the small space between it and the ceiling. The closet opened and two of her brothers came out, each with an end of soft cord between them.

"We didn't kill him," Chandra reassured me, dropping lightly from the top of the wardrobe into the arms of her tallest brother. "And the kingdom won't die." Behind her in the doorway stood two tall, lean men in deerskins, swords in hand, their long fair hair streaming to their waists and their heavily bearded cheeks painted with a reeking blue mixture.

"Nor vill we ledt our brodder die," the eldest said in an accent so thick I could barely comprehend it. I backed into a corner as the bloody barbarian offered me a hand and wrist to clasp. "Ondic, eldest son of der ghief's vife, princess of der Triple Gingdom, brodder to der liddtle prince who t'inks as vell as svings a svord, and nephew to the modder of these brave lads and this lass."

I translated his bloody think dialect as best I could in my mind's ear, my heart sick with fear and betrayal.

"We will nodt let the father of our brodder die, either. Qvick, lad! We haff very liddtle time."

I stared at Chandra and her brothers with the same sense of anger and shock as when I had learned my fate. The same look that Glory had at the altar. "Our land! Our kingdom!" I protested.

"Will go on, bodt with a new king," Ondic said, quite as if it were a settled matter. I saw then the golden circlet around his shaggy curls. My father's crown! "If your father will swear allegiance to me, the son of his sister, he can live in peaceful retirement, far from the city. We have a villa at Largoth that could use a lord."

"Never!" I raged, "Swear allegiance to you? Watch the men and boys and women of the city put to the sword and the maidens ravaged and dragged into slavery? My mother—my foster-mother and sisters—killed or treated like dogs? Never!"

Ondic leaned on his sword and looked at me. "Well, Liddtle prince, that's up to you. Our cousins we will deal widt like princesses. Their modder we will deal widt as she deals widt us. We will nodt sack a city that surrenders peacefully; that would be wasteful. Bodt der High Priest we will giff to his gods as they desire. You have no choice, liddtle brodder."

"I can die," I said in despair.

The door pushed open again, and in came a woman. She was tall and proud, with a freedom to her stride I had never seen in the palace before. Her golden hair was streaked with silver, and her eyes were as blue as my own. "That would be wasteful," she said, folding me into her arms with a kiss. "Oh, my sweet son. Why else did I lead this expedition to the city, but to rescue you?"

"The Sack of Togoth . . . ."

"A feint, a ruse. Togoth is beseiged, but no more. I can't say nobody has died," she said gravely. "But your brother Viktor lives, a prisoner on his oath of honor."

Outside in the city I could hear shouts of revelry and rage. From the Temple precinct there were no shouts, but only a dignified blare of trumpets. Two husky barbarians led my great-uncle Chador forth, robed in his finest. Chador walked proudly, his arms free, as if to a lover. He laid his silver-speckled head on the altar as if offering the last best thing he could offer his dark gods. The barbarian swung a double-bladed axe once, and it was all over. He held up Chador's head.

"If the gods of the land demand the blood of a prince," my mother said gravely, "they have it in full. It comes to me they are now satisfied, and will sleep forever in the dark earth."

"No." My father stirred and roused himself. "They do not have it in full." He put out his hand. Ondic—King Ondic?—handed him back his long gem-handled dagger. My mother gasped as I thought stupidly that they had given a captive king his honor back. My father thrust once, striking his throat full on, and fell back, blood gushing forth. "Did you think I could live with what I've done to you?" he gasped. His heels drummed on the floor as the stench of voided bowels and bladder filled the room.

I broke down and wept for my father and his wasted years of agony, for myself, for Chandra and her brothers, driven by years of evil to this act of treason. I wept for my mother and what she had endured.

Then I wept for Glory. His was the nobler part to play, after all. Then I followed my new king to the throne room with a heavy heart. Whether I ever loved again or not, I could never trust the one I loved again.

Then the gods wept, too.

Patricia Shaw Mathews

GUEST EDITORIAL

No Nice Way To Put It by Parke Godwin

"In twenty years, I've offended only three writers, two of those by accident... today I may offend wholesale..."

When MZB and Jan Burke suggested a guest piece on advice to aspiring writers, my first attempt was such a dismal failure, I almost gave up on it. Not for lack of subject matter—God knows, there were many basic convictions gleaned from twenty years in the business—but how to say them gracefully? The adverb was important. I'm a writer, not a Personality, and turned off by the callow bad manners of the *enfants terribles* who now and then beset this genre where egos fly as lethally as bullets in Panama. In twenty years, I've offended only three writers, two of those by accident.

Hence the above title; today I may offend wholesale since the best and most salutary advice I can give you is no easier to prescribe gracefully than it will be to swallow. But for what it's worth—advice to people who earnestly think they want to write. Let's begin with some basic definitions. Talent, discipline, drive.

Talent is simply what you have to say and your unique way of saying it. *Drive* is how much you need to say it. *Discipline* is what keeps you saying it until someone takes notice. The last two are by far the most important, because talent alone will not cut it. Talented people are a dime a dozen. (Hey, don't get mad. You ain't heard nothin' yet.) Choosing between a blazing talent without drive or discipline and a moderate but disciplined and determined ability, I'd bet the latter for success. That's why in any field of endeavor, there's always much more acceptable mediocrity than obvious gift.

Unless you're willing to work and go on working for years, forget about being a professional. No editor or agent is interested in a one-book or now-and-then author. They invest in you on the principle of expected volume, and building a relationship takes time. Like raising a child, your career will be a major commitment and your life will be shaped around it. As in any career, certain common sense dictates will follow, quid pro quo. If you want this, you pay that.

Many careers have pensions; you won't. They have medical insurance; you'll pay that yourself. So watch your health, starting now. It's the only one you'll ever have, speaking from painful personal experience. My younger brother came late to writing but would have been far more commercial than me. After a few amateurish efforts, he published one short story that was immediately snatched up for several reprints and has recently been optioned for film. Earl was serious about writing, wanted it more than anything else, but by then he'd drunk and drugged his system to the point of no return and eaten his weight up to two hundred and sixty pounds. Between obesity and lowered resistance, he died at fifty-three from a condition that shouldn't have been fatal. Fifty-three: for a healthy writer, that's young. For him it was old. My kid brother barely got his foot into the door of a career he wanted with all his heart and guts. Tragic? Yeah. Waste? Nothing but. He dug his own grave. And where's *your* head at right now?

I'm as addictive as he was, bone lazy and self-indulgent. A few years ago it got out of hand to the point where I had to remind myself (in the gentle tones reserved for one's dearest), "Look, slob, something's gotta go. Your self-indulgence or your nice, shiny career, what'll it be?"

Sound familiar? Whatever the detracting problem, be it substance or attitude, the professional puts this whip to his/her spirit, not only through respect for the talent but because contracts have been signed, money has changed hands and a lot of people are waiting for him/her to deliver. If not, there are others who can. Publishing is a small town where everyone knows everyone and reputations circulate at light speed. Regardless of convention camaraderie, there's no sentimentality back in the office among bottom-line people concerned with profit and loss—and, not so incidentally, their own very insecure jobs. If you hold up production because the book isn't finished through one or another personal problems that you just can't cut, they'll remember it. "I had such a hassle getting the damned book out of him ..."

Why am I on about health in regard to your talent? Because the way you relate to your body very accurately reflects the way you relate to your life. In any successful career, you get your act together and keep it there, especially in the arts where the competition is plentiful and just as good as you. Time after time at conventions I've been struck by the hordes of obese young fans and wannabe writers. All that eagerness dragging along an afterthought of a body. These young hopefuls will solicit and listen carefully to career advice from professionals, but this is one aspect that gets ignored along with the cogent questions: if you can't control your life, how will you cope with a demanding career in which drudgery, frustration and heartbreak are much more frequent factors than joy, triumph and awards?

Now you can get mad. By now you're probably fuming at the opinionated nerd in the hornrimmed glasses. Good. If the shoe fits, get mad enough to do something about it. You think writing is tough? Think of the pianist who works eight or more hours a day to develop his art, the actor who puts years into honing body, mind and voice to a fine instrument. Or the ballet dancer who begins to train before puberty for a career—*if* the dancer is that good—that probably won't extend much beyond twenty years. I've been privileged to know fine artists in all these disciplines. None of them can afford self-indulgence. They nurture their talents like hothouse flowers and have an almost feral instinct for what can harm them. Male or female, they have sinewy spirits, the dedication of Jesuits. Inside, where it counts, they are tough as nails.

I meet dozens of people fascinated with the notion of being writers (as opposed to actually writing). Their hearts are ever in the right place. They *will* exhume and have another go at that half-finished fantasy manuscript that will put Tolkien to shame—that is, I mean, soon as they get their heads together. Been a wild month, know what I mean, problems you

GUEST EDITORIAL — Parke Godwin

wouldn't believe at the office/with the boyfriend/girlfriend/spouse, and if there were just more hours in a day, forgodsake. Hey, maybe after the next REDUNDANTCON coming up too soon, but they can't miss the costume contest or the filk-singing, but honest, *right* after that ...

Sure they will. Any year now. There's no such thing as people who want to write, only those who write. Don't tell me your problems, they're zip compared to what you'll find after you *are* a professional, like just making a living. I was a good twelve years into this business before I could live on what I wrote. From trade zines like *LOCUS*, you may have gleaned a roseate view of a writer's finances. For example—*voila!* There's a picture of our latest young literary messiah, Alexandra Jejune. Ms. Jejune looks rather wispy and writes that way; nevertheless, in the accompanying blurb, you read that she has just sold her new trilogy, *The Ruptured Unicorn*, for six figures! Stunned by largesse, the young author is sufficiently *nouveau* to brandish the exact amount. $200,000. Just count them zeroes and eat your heart out. What you won't read, and which Ms. Jejune will painfully learn, is that her three books are to be joint-accounted. She will be chained to her word processor for several years in writing these books while her publisher doles out the advance with a small spoon over a period of at least three years. She won't see a cent in royalties over and above until all three books earn out—when and if. The deal was very likely hard/soft, so she won't see extra money on the paperback edition unless the sales go stratospheric. Just how stratospheric depends on factors no one can predict, like advertising budget and how much excitement the publisher can pump into the regional sales people. These harried and hard-bitten folk will listen to a brief pitch on the book and will be mainly concerned th the impact of the cover art. The print run will be a compromise number between what the publisher paid Alexandra and what the sales people feel they can sell. For fear of terminal trauma, authors are almost never invited to these conferences. But on...

The contract probably bought British rights, too; they'll be funnelled into the earn-out. Then there are agents' commissions, domestic and foreign, and income tax. When our Alexandra averages her yearly income over the writing and publishing of this trilogy, that fat advance dwindles to modest reality. How she deals with this truth depends on her character. If she doesn't care that much about money, she has been provided with a living while doing what she loves. If she's a yuppie, she'll moan about economic serfdom. And where's your head at now?

Up to this point, I've spoken of professional attitudes, factors you can foster and control. There's one you can't, an intangible X factor that will influence everything you do. The element of time and growth. Quoting famous writers is sententious and lazy, but Thoreau's insight is too pertinent to ignore: "How vain it is to sit down to write when you have never stood up to live."

At twenty and even thirty, I thought I had a great deal to say and a god-like ability to express it, Christ with a typewriter. That I wasn't Jesus didn't stop me nor should it you. We all have to pay our dues, put in our time, write the immaturity out of us, so better early than late. In that primeval, insecure learning time, ego was the only carapace my inexperience could manage—and thank God for it, as the oyster said, producing a pearl band-aid. While his rejections are returning as regularly as the swallows to Capistrano, a young writer needs that ego out there like the ice breaker on a ship's prow. If he's got the drive, discipline and stubborn toughness, sooner or later he'll break through.

If he grows, that is. If he can profit from life and time.

Not so common an ability. There are legions of people who pass painlessly and unscathed from youth to senescence, ignorance intact as the day they were born. They look serene in their retirement or fiftieth wedding anniversary portraits. Peace be unto them, they are not artists. If you want to write, you can't afford to tiptoe through life without touching anything, unless you're a complacent hack, in which case you're excused now. It takes an enormous amount of living to produce even a little worth reading.

Of my early attempts at fiction, my pithy brother said, "You were always good; just you didn't know anything." He was right. Luckily, from 1959 until 1971 I wrote virtually nothing, too busy learning the world hands-on, including other disciplines like music, theater, history and archeology. I suffered through two divorces (and no one comes out of those without learning something), joyed and sorrowed through X number of love affairs, good, bad and plain stupid. I've danced in musicals and sweated to unearth Bronze Age artifacts in Scotland, been at different times a caring human being and the sort of creature you'd spray with DDT. I've researched for engineers, been a wiz short-order cook and a horrendously bad *maitre d'hotel*. Along the way I've listened to every conceivable kind of man or woman tell their stories and caught the sound of them. In the last five of those wander-years, I compacted ten of experience, hurting and getting hurt myself, grabbing at life as if there were no tomorrow because sometimes the prospect was dim. At the end of that time, forgettable as the book was, I published a novel that smelled of life. Because I'd been there, I knew where the characters were coming from. So did the readers. The same day the editor bought that book, he asked about the next. As I said, no one's interested in a one-trick pony or a one-book author. There wasn't an idea in my head, but I made one up in his office and sold it. By then the dues had been paid. Talent and lyrics were secondary. First comes truth, then comes pretty.

Difficult to state clearly such a qualitative point. At one point, despairing of this article to a writer friend, I burst out: "How do I tell young writers to go out and *live* so they'll know what the hell they're writing about? I sound negative and even sadistic telling them to get their butts kicked and their hearts broken over and over until they realize how tough the human heart is."

A fine writer and large-calibre human being, she answered: "Just say it like that."

No nice way to put it. A writer can't play safe. However you define life, go out and live it. Get all the experience you can, life not just walked through but examined, digested and transmuted to universals, because that's all you'll have to sell as a writer. The human soul is a well, so dig your deep. Genre or mainstream, you'll be writing about humans for humans, and you won't ring true unless you've been there and made a few mistakes.

Sure it's hard. I'm scared green every day I sit down to face that terrifying blank page. So will you be on any day and the next and the next. :This will never change or get easier. That's why a professional, if he/she can stick it out, is so well paid. Not everyone can do it, and by now you know talent is the least of what I'm talking about. Down here at the end, I'm wondering: have I said it as well as possible? Too harsh or judgmental? My ear is troubled with a distant chorus of outraged wannabes. "Who is this smug, pontifical SOB to speak so crassly to talented ME? Does he think he knows it all?"

No, babe, not by half. Just I've been where you said you want to go.

❧ *Parke Godwin*

Hubert the Barbarian

by Martin Levy

He had the body of a god. Seven and one half feet of perfectly formed muscle. His strength seemed limitless. And he was only 19 and still growing. Women all exclaimed, "What a hunk!" The men, being less honest and more envious, had more varied comments to make. "Must work out at least three hours a day," "must take steroids," were some of the common ones.

He had the heart of a boy scout. He often aided the old and the lame in the crossing of a swamp or the scaling of a cliff.

He was not noted for brains. Well, maybe that's being a little unfair. In fact, Hubert once counted all the way up to 68 without stopping and ever since that prodigious feet his fellow barbarians considered him somewhat of a scholar. But the truth was that his major fault was taking everything said to him literally, and on many occasions this caused him to act foolishly.

People still talk about the time his mother took him to the next village for a witch-burning, and the local bully tried to pick a fight with him. He was only six at the time and the bully was about fifteen, but Hubert was only slightly shorter. The bully called him names and spit on him, but Hubert wouldn't be provoked. You see, Hubert had always been taught to avoid fighting if at all possible. In desperation the bully placed a wooden chip on his shoulder and dared Hubert to knock it off. Now this seemed harmless enough to Hubert, so with the awkward swing of a child he tried to knock the chip off. Unfortunately he missed and broke the bully's collarbone in two places. The people still laugh at the thought of Hubert's mother dragging him by the ear through the village shouting, "I told you not to start any fights," and Hubert saying "but momma ... but momma..." That was the last time anyone picked a fight with Hubert and the last time his mother pulled him by the ear (by the time he was seven his mother could no longer reach his ears).

Or when he was thirteen. By that time his mother was going through the change, what we call "raging hormones" but was then recognized as the departing of the goddess of rationality, Est-Rogen. You see, Hubert was a December baby having two considerably older brothers, both accomplished barbarians. Well anyway, during one of his mother's "moods" she tripped over their beloved pet cat and as she was falling over a chair yelled, "throw that pest out of here." So Hubert picked up the cat and flung it 150 feet into a stone wall and crushed it. These events and many others like them made people in Hubert's village very careful of what they said to him. So, due mainly to his neighbor's caution, Hubert appeared normal enough to anyone just passing through.

As fate would have it, one day the town crier announced that the king's maiden daughter, the princess DeMilo, had been captured by a sex-crazed sadistic dragon. In desperation, the king was offering to make anyone who rescued the princess heir to the throne. The crier went on further to say the job interviews for the position of Maiden Rescuer were being held every Tuesday and Thursday between 2:00 and 3:00 pm. Now Hubert, upon hearing the crier, decided that this would be as good a time as any to go out into the world and earn his barbarian's scars. So he went to his mother and asked her leave, "Momma, I would like to apply for the job of Maiden Rescuer. Can I go momma, please?"

"Oh! my poor baby, you're still so young. Why must you go now? Can't you wait another 10 or 15 years?" Hubert's mother replied.

"But momma, I am nineteen and my brothers both started being barbarians at that age. What's fair is fair. Momma please."

"Okay. Okay. I guess you're right. But mind you, your momma knows best. So when you go out into the world, remember it's not polite to ask questions, don't speak until you're spoken to, do what you're told, and respect your elders, that way you're bound to become a success."

"Yes momma."

So Hubert packed his things (a giant two-headed axe, 36 feet of rope,

Hubert the Barbarian

and a fresh change of loincloths) and off he went.

On the second night of his journey to the king's palace he came across a marauding band of trolls. Realizing that he had no practical work experience, Hubert figured that his chances of getting the job might improve if he brought along some examples of his work. So he killed six of them before the rest ran off then chopped off their heads and tied them together (through the eye sockets) and went on his way. But troll's heads as you well know, are heavy so he wound up discarding five of them along the road. Even though this business with the trolls was a freelance job, Hubert did manage to get his first barbarian's scar out of the escapade, and boy was he proud. It was a "beaut." A wide gash running from just below his left ear all the way to the bottom of his chin. So by the time he arrived at the king's palace he was feeling quite smug and certain he could handle the job of Maiden Rescuer.

After much searching Hubert finally found the chambers of the Duke of Contract Labor, and it being Tuesday, 1:15 pm, he decided to wait around for an interview. When the duke arrived Hubert politely stood up and placed the troll's head at his feet. The duke couldn't help but be impressed with the looks of Hubert. All fourteen of the previous candidates looked like runts compared to Hubert. Hubert just stood there staring.

"Have you no tongue?" the duke asked.

"Why sure I have a tongue," and Hubert stuck that huge piece of flesh out at the duke.

"Well why don't you speak up then?"

"My momma told me not to speak unless spoken to, my lord."

"Why looky here, a barbarian with manners, how quaint," the duke said sarcastically.

The sarcasm being completely lost on Hubert, he responded with a sincere, "you are very kind, my lord."

The duke, thinking Hubert was being sarcastic, started ranting and raving about how he could have him dismembered for insulting a duke. After the five minute diatribe by the duke, Hubert calmly responded by saying, "Why my lord, I'm sure everything you said is true, but what does that have to do with anything we've been talking about? I just got to this palace today and have never talked to a duke before. I came here hoping to find a job as a Maiden Rescuer and was told you were the person in charge of hiring."

The duke then muttered something to himself about the brains of a tulip and said, "yes, I think you'll do. I'll arrange an appointment for you to see the king. He has the final say in all matters pertaining to maiden rescuing."

Hubert left the chambers completely confused, wondering what tulips have to do with anything and thinking the duke quite mad.

The following morning Hubert had his interview with the king. Once in the king's presence he bowed low and then stood up and just stared at the king. The duke had to explain to the king that Hubert wouldn't speak unless spoken to. So the king asked, "Have you ever killed a dragon before?"

"No, your majesty."

"Have you ever rescued a maiden before?"

"No, your majesty."

"What work have you done before this?"

"None, your majesty."

"Well then, what makes you think you are qualified for the job?"

Now Hubert found this to be an unusual question. He knew he was qualified for the job, of that he had no doubt. But what made him think? That was a tough question. After much thought he said, "I have no idea, your majesty."

"You have no idea! Then why are you applying for the job?"

"Your majesty, I thought I was applying for the job of Maiden Rescuer. I have no idea how what 'makes me think' has anything to do with the job."

The king was about to have Hubert slaughtered on the spot for impertinence, but the duke took the king aside and explained the situation. It took the king a few minutes to calm down and then he finally asked Hubert, "Do you have any questions?"

"My momma told me it's not polite to ask questions, your majesty."

"What other little gems did your mother tell you?"

"She never told me anything about little gems, your majesty, but she did say, 'do what you're told, respect your elders, and you're bound to become a success.'"

The king muttered something like, must run in the family and brains of a petunia but just said, "good advice young man, good advice." The king then gave Hubert the following charge: "You are to return here with my daughter or not return at all. Do you understand?"

"Yes, your majesty."

Now the king issued the following proclamation: "Hubert the Barbarian, royal emissary to the king, is hereby charged with the slaying of the dragon and the return of my daughter, the Royal Princess DeMilo. Upon successful completion of this mission he will become heir to my kingdom."

So to the sound of much cheering Hubert went forth on his royal mission, wondering what petunias had to do with anything and thinking the king also quite mad.

After tracking the dragon for six days Hubert still hadn't seen so much as one fresh footprint. Hubert wasn't complaining though. The weather was fine and the trail was easy to follow. All he had to do was look for discarded barbarian bones along the way. They were the remains of his fourteen predecessors. On the seventh day he rested. While contentedly sitting alongside the trail fondling his scar, he heard some screaming coming from the next rise. At first he thought it was the sound of a terror-stricken damsel in distress, possibly even a princess, but on the other hand he thought it might be the sound of a damsel in ecstasy. He always got those two sounds confused. So rather than possibly intrude where he was not wanted, his good upbringing prevailed and he just lay back and let the screaming continue.

Three hours thus passed. Finally he said to himself, someone is either having one hell of a time or is being terribly tortured. So knowing the dragon's reputation Hubert decided to investigate. Well that was his lucky day because sure enough there was a beautiful princess, naked, hands and feet bound, bleeding, and screaming. All around her could be seen an assortment of whips, chains, and spiked harnesses of various kinds. Now Hubert knew better than to look into that demented dragon's eyes (it was common knowledge among barbarians that a dragon can hypnotize one)

and he wasn't a betting man, but Hubert said to himself he would lay odds that the overgrown worm was drooling and smiling.

But now the excitement of a battle was upon him and fury replaced reason. Faster than a speeding lance he rushed over to the princess, scooped her up, and stood between her and the dragon as he unslung his great two-headed axe. Just as the dragon was in the midst of taking a deep breath so that upon exhaling he would burn them both to a crisp, Hubert let fly his ax. In the next instant the dragon lay limp at the barbarian's feet, his skull perfectly split, with the ax neatly imbedded right between the eyes just above the eyebrows. Upon turning to the princess to receive what he felt were some well deserved compliments, a great disappointment overcame him. It was then that he realized that on his backstroke he accidentally decapitated the beautiful princess.

He made a mental note to himself to be more careful in the future as to where he should place damsels in distress while combating the forces of evil. But remembering the king's charge to return with the princess or not at all, he picked up her head along with the rest of her, and after removing all the dragon's teeth (they are quite valuable) started on his return journey. A short way down the road he managed to trade a complete set of dragon's uppers with one of the local peasants for two horses and a sack. Even though dragon teeth were worth a great deal, Hubert reasoned that placing the princess in a sack and letting a horse carry it would save a lot of time; and, what were a mere set of uppers compared to all the wealth he would receive when he became heir to the kingdom. On the third day of his return trip Hubert was happily singing to himself about the success of his first venture (after all, he started with nothing, now he had two horses, a princess, and a complete set of dragon lowers) when he came upon a huge horde of bandits. The leader approached Hubert.

"Yo stranger, what have you in the sack?"

Now the leader of the bandits appeared to be an elderly man, and bandit or not, Hubert knew it wasn't polite to lie, and remembered to respect his elders. "A princess," the barbarian replied.

The bandit chief turned to his men and whispered, "This lad is a clever one, hiding the princess in a sack in order to prevent her from being kidnapped for ransom." Turning to Hubert he said, "You must be a stout fighter to have rescued the princess from the clutches of that foul dragon."

"Thank you kindly sir," answered Hubert.

"Now listen here, I have a deal for you. We be 62 men, all mean and nasty cutthroats we are, you be but one. We want the princess to hold for ransom. Give her here, and there is no need to fight."

"But the king has given me a charge to return with the princess or not to return at all."

"Barbarian, I"ll tell you what. I'll give you an official note in my own hand saying that for two chests of jewels I'll return the princess to the king in your name."

Now Hubert didn't think a beheaded princess was worth that much but everything else the bandit said made sense. Why fight 62 men when a simple trade would satisfy all parties concerned. So they shook hands on the deal and Hubert gave the bandit a sack full of princess and he took the official note, and agreed to meet the bandit with the jewels just outside the castle in two days. Hubert was out of sight before the bandits realized that the princess was not a together person.

On the outskirts of kingdom, Hubert, not wanting to return without the princess, gave the note to one of the king's soldiers and said he would wait there for an answer. Upon reading the note, the king was at once overjoyed that his daughter had been rescued from the dragon and enraged that the barbarian would turn her over to a bunch of common bandits. He could just imagine what they might do to her. But realizing that the bandits held all the cards he quickly dispatched the two chests of jewels, so in a couple of days Hubert had the jewels and was on the road again. This time he hadn't been travelling a day when he came upon the bandits. The leader was furious.

"You gave us a dead princess."

"I had no other," said Hubert.

"I'll have your liver out for this."

"Why are you so upset? All you asked me was what I had in the sack, you never asked about the health of the princess."

"You have got a point there. But of what use is a dead princess?"

"None that I can think of, but regardless, I have the jewels and we struck a bargain. So I would appreciate it if you would return the princess and I'll be on my way."

"But we threw her away!"

"Well, I'm sorry. A deal is a deal; no princess, no jewels."

As Hubert was turning to leave, the bandit chief yelled out, "Wait, I'll have one of my men go and fetch her."

Four hours later Hubert was on his way back to the castle with the princess. Hubert went directly to the king's main hall and placed the sack in front of the throne.

The king asked anxiously, "What is in the sack?"

"I have returned with your daughter, your majesty."

Upon hearing this there was much cheering and shouting amongst the folk milling about the throne room.

"Why do you keep the princess in a sack?"

"It seemed the best way to travel, your majesty."

"Why this is a disgrace. Open the sack immediately."

As Hubert opened the sack the princess's head rolled out.

"She's dead! Those bandits murdered her. Why didn't you tell me she was murdered?"

"Your majesty, in the first place the bandits didn't murder her. It was I who accidentally chopped off her had in my haste to slay the dragon. In the second place I never told you she was dead because you never asked about her well-being."

The immense shock of the situation caused the king to have a stroke. Within two days he died. Within another day Hubert was proclaimed king as was decreed in the aforementioned proclamation.

As Hubert was accepting the crown he was heard saying to himself: "Momma always said to do what you are told and you are bound to become a success." I guess it's true what they say about momma knows best!

❧ *Martin Levy*

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The Siren

by Patrick J. Swenson

In the evening before her departure for Churas Island, Kiri met with her father and her Questor-Magician teacher, Shayim Kem. She gazed out the window of her room, the Western Sea visible over the parapets.

"You still insist on sailing in the morning?" her father asked her. "Shayim says you're not ready."

"You have constantly told me," Kiri said, "that Kellen must take his rightful place beside you on the throne of Larim. I must go before it's too late."

Shayim nodded. "Of course. My first mate is Sheiro, a good, strong woman. She has been in charge of the fishing fleet for as long as I can remember."

"She and the other women will guide the ship well," said Shayim. "They know the Western Sea better than any one." He paused and cast a glance at the King. Her father gave a slight nod and Shayim continued. "However,we do not wish for the women of our great land to continue in the labors forces upon them by the Siren's song. Besides returning the Crown Prince, a successful Quest will destroy the Siren, and bring normalcy to Larim."

"I will do both, faithfully," said Kiri.

Her father spoke forcefully. "The Siren is dangerous. An evil enchantress. I know of her and her power. I know of it like no other does."

"What is it you know other than what legend tells?"

Now her father glanced momentarily at Shayim and their eyes exchanged secrets "I can't say," he said, "but there is much you will never know about the Siren. You can only know what Shayim has already told you about her; that she haunts the Western Sea, protecting herself with her magical song. That no man can resist the song. Shayim has told you all he can."

"And have you?" she wondered.

He paused, and said, "Of course."

"You have the power to defeat the Siren, Kiri," Shayim said. "You've proven yourself in the required rituals. But remember, your brother is enthralled to the Siren. She fills his heart with love and he will be compelled to stay. Your magic will need to be strong, but right now it lacks focus. Your touch-invocation is wild—"

"Remember once," she interrupted, "before the wolf-ritual, when I changed the sparrow into a golden eagle?"

"Yes," Shayim agreed, "and you also changed ants into firedragons, but your lack of focus nearly killed us both. What do you expect to happen when you try such magic on the Siren? Don't misunderstand us, Kiri. We want the Siren destroyed. Kellen attempted this on his own Quest, but we didn't know then the extent of the Siren's power."

The memories of Kellen flooded back to her. She reached her tenth birthday a week before Kellen set out for Churas Island with his crew. Those of the crew that knew Kiri went in together to buy her a red tappan pendant, and Kellen presented it to her the day his ship left Larim.

The Kavin docks sank precariously under the weight of those seeing Kellen off on this Quest, and Kiri took her place next to her father, waving, yelling at her brother to make sure he heard her goodbyes. The festivities went on even after the sails of his ship disappeared over the horizon. Vendors showcased their wares on the street all day and every Questor-Magician in the City of Castles presented grand spectacles during an evening parade, illuminating the route with their spells and wizardry.

Kiri swam in the shallows of the harbor the morning Kellen's ship returned. A fishing trawler bobbed along one of the piers, the women stringing nets and preparing for a day at sea, and one of them pointed to the distant boat and its torn sails. The ship docked an hour later and Kiri listened, trying to understand when the handful of men related their tale, when they told everyone that the Siren had kept Kellen and the rest of the crew for herself. 'The Siren despises us,' they said. 'She sends this warning, that she will return someday and have her revenge.'

Kiri stared down at the red tappan hanging from her neck, the bright stone trapped within a circle of etched bronze, its weight a burden, a monument to lost souls. She ran her finger over its surface.

"We understand her power now," her father said, interrupting her thoughts. Kiri blinked at him, and he nodded, as if agreeing with himself. "You are our only hope of ridding the Western Sea of her presence," her father whispered.

Kiri detected a slight tone of regret in her father's voice. *They are not sure about me still. They don't like the thought of me doing this unpleasant task for them.*

"Have you thought of what will happen if I kill the Siren?" Kiri asked. We have not had war with Mrygia across the Western Sea since the Siren's exile at Churas. Their warriors, too, have been unable to travel the seas. With the Siren gone, we will plunge back into our never-ending war with them."

"Our men have been raised for war for as long as the Mrygian threat has existed," the King said. "It is the life they are used to."

Kiri felt herself shudder at the thought of Larim returned to war. "Very well," she said, "I hear your words." She curtseyed

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respectfully to Shayim, then walked over and kissed her father lightly on the cheek.

Smiling confidently, she said, "I leave tomorrow at first light."

In the morning, Kiri made her way down the Rock Steps, the great stairway that Questrals had hewn long ago into the white cliffs of Kavin.

The City of Castles sat high on top of the cliffs, overlooking the Western Sea. The cliff stretched north and south as gateway to the Larim Peninsula and the Seventeen Cities. Grand cedar trees, interspersed with pine and hemlock, grew around the outskirts of the city on three sides, but the cliffs, holding back the sea, with the Rock Steps the only access to the Kavin Docks, guarded the final side of the City of Castles.

A large crowd of well-wishers had gathered at the docks. Kiri's father stood next to Shayim Kem on the main dock. She embraced her father and they lingered, Kiri holding tight, drawing strength from him. She removed her pendant and gave it to him. "Hold this for me, father, as I have held it for Kellen."

"I will."He took the pendant and kissed her forehead. "Peace to you, and good Quest."

"Good Quest, Kiri," Shayim said, hugging her briefly. "I hope the gods see fit to return you and Kellen to us."

Kiri nodded. "I will not disappoint you."

The ship finally slipped into the green water of Kavin Harbor, the briny waves lapping gently on the wooden hull of the *Sister's Brother*, named in honor of Kellen. Kiri shaded her eyes from the sun as she gazed eastward, back toward the docks. She saw her father there, a featureless silhouette that reminded her of the unknown she would face in the Western Sea.

She smiled happily when she saw the King drop a single olive branch from the dock. In Larim, it was the blessing reserved for sailors journeying upon the uncharted sea.

Soon after the Chappanine Islands shrank and disappeared behind them, Kiri heard the Siren's song. The strange, sad melody hinted of bittersweetness—just as legend told—but she found nothing magical about it; the song did not affect women. The song strengthened and continued night and day, escorting them past the margin of civilized lands.

They sailed for nearly a week, and Kiri marveled at her crew's ability, the women self-reliant and comfortable with their given tasks. She too felt strong and confident. Only the breezy song checked her determination. One misty afternoon, the high lookouts informed her they had spotted the island of Churas.

The island appeared as a dark spot on the horizon. Kiri stood at the bow until she could make out the singularity of trees blanketing the island in a dense forest. Only a thin strip of beach offered a contrast; it wound around the island like a white ribbon. Kiri ordered Sheiro to move the ship about the coast in search of a place to debark. A large inlet looked adequate and the *Sister's Brother* cast anchor.

The Siren's sad, sweet song wafted on a steady breeze and reminded Kiri of the task ahead.

"Shayim told me the Siren has the ability to change her magic to fit any condition given her," Kiri said to Sheiro. "I will not risk the possibility of any of you coming to harm."

Kiri took a skiff and rowed up the inlet alone, until shallow water forced her to continue on foot. She used the Siren's song to guide her as she trudged up a hill, working through the brush and pines. Earlier, the sky had been clear, the air crisp. But a dense fog formed after she reached the crest of the hill, surrounding her, forcing slower steps. Bumps formed on her flesh, the wrap-around animal skin offering little protection from the sudden cold and the quickening breeze.

Then the fog thinned to reveal a clearing. Kiri took a single step out of the trees and saw eight or nine men scattered about the clearing. They wore only loincloths.

In the middle of the clearing stood a dwelling made of white stone. A platform connected to the front of the cottage. There, on a couch, rested the Siren. She wore a gown of white, vague as the misty fog. Her black hair reached the ground from her prone position. A man kneeled by the couch, his head resting pitifully on the Siren's bosom.

Kiri stepped closer. She hadn't seen her brother for ten years, but she recognized the man at the Siren's platform. *Kellen*. She turned away, ashamed.

At this moment, the Siren's song stopped. Kiri turned her head back to the platform and saw the Siren rise from the couch. Kellen remained upon his knees. The Siren's eyes narrowed and her black hair fanned out behind her in the breeze. Kellen looked like a sullen child next to her.

Kiri spoke first. "Hello, Kellen," she said.

He frowned, disbelief in his eyes. "Kiri, is it you?"

She nodded.

The Siren smiled mischievously. "Princess Kiri." A deep voice. Throaty. "Kellen has spoken of you as a young girl, but you are a grown woman now."

Kiri wondered why the Siren seemed so friendly. She walked cautiously up to the cottage.

"You have traveled far for nothing, young princess," the Siren said. "Kellen is mine forever, as are these men of his. The song I sing fills their hearts like blood. Even now, I do not sing my song, but the spell is cast— they will not leave."

"He can choose to come with me," Kiri argued. She held out a hand to him.

Kellen waved her away. "No, I can't. I will never return to the City of Castles. Go home, Kiri."

She paled and the Siren's voice spoke in her ear. "Sail back to your city, Kiri. You can't force him away from me—he'll die first."

Kiri couldn't break the Siren's power by persuasion, but she had magic of her own. It coursed through her, building, like the Siren's song upon their approach to Churas. She focused her thoughts in response, Shayim's instructions directing her: *Remember, Kiri. Brevity. Focus and concentration. And touch.*

Kiri inched closer to the couch. "You know you would return if you were able," she said to Kellen.

Kellen's eyes flicked toward the Siren, but the enchantress didn't seem to notice. He said slowly, "Perhaps I might, but that will never happen."

The Siren simply smiled.

"You've changed, Kellen," Kiri said to him. "How can you stay here and be her slave when she doesn't love you?"

"How do you know what I or she feels?" he challenged. "You've led a sheltered, innocent life, locked up in Father's castle. You've only seen half the world, Kiri, and now you bother yourself to come here and tell me what I must do."

She knew it to be true. Discovering her magic had given her a means to grow, unraveling her purpose in the world, but her experience fell short of reality. Early in her training Kiri had left the City of Castles to contemplate all that was magic in the world, and in so doing found the key to her strange magic. She discovered it was wild, unpredictable, invoked by touch. She became Larim's first female magician.

Her father and Shayim sent her to kill the Siren and bring back Kellen, and she accepted the dangerous journey, but now she was unsure of her task. The Siren remained a mystery to her.

"In fact," Kellen said, raising himself on one elbow, "how can you be on a Quest? How did you get here without the aid of magicians? All the men on your ship should have heard the song, followed it here and pledged themselves—"

"A female crew brought me here," Kiri said. "And I'm the magician that guided them."

The Siren's expression changed. The smile disappeared, but her eyes kept their clarity. "A magician," she whispered. "Can this be true?"

Kellen didn't believe it. "That's impossible. There are no female magicians in Larim."

"I am the first," said Kiri.

The Siren stiffened and her eyes became like fire. But then they softened and she said, "That's not true. I was the first. I came to the City of Castles to study with your pompous father, and I'm here now because he fears me."

Shayim had never told her about this. The Siren, a Larim magician! *The Siren studied with Father?*

"Your father betrayed me and exiled me here on Churas, said I had violated Questral Law. I swore revenge, that I would haunt the seas and someday return to the City of Castles. Your father sent your brother to kill me, did you know that? He should have known better. You should know better. You need me, Kiri. The world needs me."

No, the world needs a Crown Prince. Kiri glanced at Kellen, saw him sit passively on the couch. *Or a Crown Princess.*

The time had come. The Siren wanted to return to Larim and Kiri couldn't allow that. The words she heard that morning eight years ago in Kavin Harbor haunted her, Kellen's friends, malnourished and dirty, nearly spitting the words. *The Siren despises us,* they said. *She will return someday and have her revenge.*

Wild magic bubbled. Shayim's warnings bombarded her thoughts: *Brevity, focus, and touch.* She knew of only one way to make sure the invocation brought her latent power to bear, but even then she distrusted her ability to keep focus and control.

Kiri unwrapped herself from the animal skin and dropped it to the ground. Kiri had smooth, fair skin. Her brown hair draped over her shoulders and nestled over small breasts that floated shallow on her rib cage. The breeze tugged at her hair and she tasted oil as the strands blew across her mouth. Sunlight burned through the last of the dissipating fog and warmed her, tickling the fine silky hairs on her skin.

The Siren laughed. "Is this how you hope to battle me?" She seemed to grow in stature. She had the maturity of age.

"It's not my intention," Kiri said boldly, "to defile myself by defeating you."

The Siren's face colored. "Young magician, you humor me. Do you understand how long I've been here, building my power? How long I've wished to be free of this accursed island? I've waited for you ever since my exile here." Her eyes narrowed. "Your father sent you here to kill me, didn't he? Like he sent Kellen."

Kiri shook her head. "I've made my own choice. I'm taking Kellen with me, not you, nor any of these other men, if need be."

Kellen spoke up, and his voice sounded agitated. "Kiri, *please*—"

Siren or not, Kiri had her chance. Shayim's voice came to her one last time. *What do you expect to happen when you try such magic on the Siren?*

Or Kellen?

Touch. Wild, unpredictable. Make sure. Out of the castle tower, to the real world, away from the innocence of youth.

Forgive me, Kellen.

She threw herself into Kellen, knocking him backward on the couch. She pinned him beneath her and he began to struggle. Magic seethed in her blood like hissing snakes ready to strike. Kellen fought her and she clasped her hands to the sides of the couch to keep from falling off. She felt the magic steaming as she made contact.

Touch.

But the Siren hadn't given up. In the stillness of the clearing, during Kiri and Kellen's silent struggle, the enchantress sang a new song, very different from the one Kiri had heard for days on the *Sister's Brother.* Kellen calmed down underneath her, but Kiri barely noticed him. She heard a voice in the strange song as the Siren spoke to her mind. Kiri shook her head, trying to block out the whispers:

I have borne sadness, the Siren sang. *A lonely life. The power of magic over the Seventeen Cities is in my blood, Kiri, but useless to me!*

Kiri became sleepy; she lost track of her own thoughts and wondered what she had been doing moments ago. Something about focus and touch?

I need time, the Siren intoned, *but I can control you, have you do my bidding. You need me, I need you. Larim needs both of us, Kiri!*

Kiri's eyes closed, weighted with fatigue and confusion. What was it she had to do? She couldn't concentrate. She loosened her grip on the couch, helpless.

Kiri heard her brother speak. "Kiri! What are you doing? My gods, get off of me—I'm free of her!"

The Siren stopped singing completely when Kellen spoke. Kiri's own thoughts returned to her. *Of course.* By changing the nature of her song, the Siren had lost control of her spell over Kellen. *And the other men?* Kiri shook off all inward thoughts, felt Kellen beneath her, and yelled a single word that echoed through the clearing. *"Change!"*

The wind increased its push ten-fold and she held on tight to the couch. Her concentration wavered as Kellen's form began to melt under her. She heard confused shouts from the other men in the clearing, but she could pay them no mind. She could save only Kellen.

"No!" the Siren cried. "You can't defy me!" The new song started again, more strident this time.

At the same time, Kiri felt the Siren's hands close around her throat. The fingers didn't squeeze, they simply held firm against her skin. Kiri turned her magic inward, trying to distinguish her body from that of Kellen's, struggling with the distraction of the Siren's weight. She was losing focus.

Several loud thunderclaps confirmed her fears, the wind whistling fiercely as it swept through the clearing. Something hit hear—the angry wind?—and she felt herself fall from the platform. The Siren's hands still grasped her throat.

Kiri heard the enchantress's wild tantrums and desperate pleas . . .

Take me with you! she screamed into Kiri's mind.

"No!" yelled Kiri.

I'll destroy you, the Siren threatened.

"I am stronger in heart. You have no power over me!"

No, we are the same, parts of one world. Help me—

"No."

You have the magic to do it. You have what I lack. You simply don't realize who you are, or who I am. Let me tell you what you have.

"I don't understand you."

"Kiri, dear Kiri, it is so simple—

Kiri gasped as pictures formed in her mind, and suddenly she understood. *Father!* Kiri thought. *Why? Why have you forced me to this?*

The Siren pleaded to be heard. The change had been made on Kellen but he might still be in danger. She helped him by altering him further, invoking the magic again to give him her own thoughts so he would know what to do if he survived the magic. Kellen's body continued to change.

Kiri's knowledge of the Siren had come from her father's portrayal of her, and even from Kiri's own first perception. The Siren was the revengeful enchantress, fanatical, bleeding a desire to rejoin the world. She *was* dangerous in that respect.

But the Siren was more than that. *She's right,* Kiri thought. *I cannot simply strike her down.* She startled herself when she finally realized what she had to do. *Gods above, there is a way!*

She had to try. For the Seventeen Cities of Larim, she had to complete the change. Her lips trembled with a different kind of fear now, but with a brief, focused word, she invoked her magic one more time.

She woke to find herself bundled

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up in furs in a cabin below decks of the *Sister's Brother.* The wind howled and the ship rolled and pitched angrily while the crew's muffled voices shouted urgently to each other topside. Hours passed. When it seemed the storm would continue forever, it died out suddenly and the ship stopped its thrashing from side to side.

Kiri listened for a certain sound, the bittersweet song of the Siren, but remembered what had happened on Churas and knew there would be none.

Her body shook with cold, but she ignored her discomfort and forced herself to climb the stairs. Indeed, as she emerged into sunlight, the sea was calm and only a slight wind filled the sails. A rainbow stretched across the water, but it bridged nothing solid.

The first mate came quickly to her side and supported her with a strong arm. "Kiri, you're all right. Thank the gods."

"Sheiro," she whispered to the mate.

Sheiro smiled. "The ship is safe. Eight men arrived on board just before you floated down the inlet in the skiff, but—" She lowered her eyes and her voice softened. "Kellen wasn't among them. I'm sorry, but we had to leave Churas because of the storm."

"You did right, Sheiro," she told the first mate. "Where are we?"

An embarrassed pause. "Alas," she sighed, "we are lost."

Wrapping the animal furs tighter around her body, Kiri shook off Sheiro's arm and moved to the bow of the ship. She stared out at the sea, the wind stinging her eyes; she smelled the strong scent of saltwater on the breeze.

Five days passed. Water and food dwindled, but Kiri didn't worry, eating and drinking little herself. The crew muttered when they thought Kiri couldn't hear, but she ignored them too. And soon, she called to Sheiro.

"Look, don't you see?" Kiri pointed up to the blue sky. A tiny seagull circled above them. "Follow. The gull will seek land."

"But what if it returns us to Churas Island instead of the Peninsula?"

"What does it matter? If we ended up at Churas, we could regain our bearings. Do you hear the Siren's song? No. There would be no danger at Churas."

The first mate agreed with a nod.

So the ship tacked awkwardly in order to follow the seagull. The crew still muttered, but now Kiri heard the buzz of whispers and terse conversation turn hopeful.

They followed the gull for two days, and in the bright sunshine of the third, the lookouts spotted the white cliffs of Kavin. The *Sister's Brother* had come in from the south, bypassing the Chappanines, but Kiri recognized the majestic cliffs, saw the dense trees and the cut of the Rocks Steps. She smiled as the City of Castles, sprawled atop the Steps like a magnificent crown, came into view off the bow of the *Sister's Brother.*

Kiri put her hand to her forehead and lifted her eyes to the sky. The white gull circled down toward the ship, wings outstretched to catch the wind's currents. The gull settled gently on her shoulder and Kiri reached across to hold it with one hand, whispering in its ear. The bird started to shimmer and she placed it on the deck as a stiff breeze whipped her hair and a low rumble echoed across the calm sea.

The bird's feathers disappeared, the beak vanished. Substance was added and the shape began to look human. The transformation continued. When the magic finished, Kellen stood naked on the deck.

After studying himself briefly, Kellen smiled with relief. "Kiri—"

She faltered, numbed from the cold and released magic. Kellen grasped her shoulders to keep her from falling. Sheiro brought Kellen some furs and Kiri welcomed him as they clung to each other.

With her head against his chest, Kiri finally said, "Kellen, I thought at first only to save you. You were made as the gull, so you could escape and guide us home."

"Thank you, Kiri," Kellen said, but his voice had a faraway quality, remembering the Siren. "Soaring above you on Churas, I saw you entangled with the Siren, saw her melt, then evaporate into nothingness. I loved her, but she was evil. I will ask you to be my adviser, Kiri, my most trusted magician. What dreams I have! No longer shall the women fish the Western Sea for the ocean's harvest. Men can now sail again without fear, and the ships will take our warriors across the sea to wage our battles with Mrygia."

The *Sister's Brother* pulled into Kavin Harbor and Sheiro hustled the women to their posts as they neared the base of the cliffs. The entire population waited to greet them; the city's bells rang in triumph as the people waved from atop the cliffs, from their places on the Rock Steps and the Kavi Docks.

Kiri saw Shayim Kem, saw the great teacher smile proudly at her. Then the King appeared from behind him, waving with the rest of his people, his purple and crimson Questral robe looking out of place on the docks. The red tappan pendant hung from his neck.

Kiri didn't rejoice. She looked up at Kellen's smiling face, saw him waving back to the crowd. "Kellen," she said softly.

Her brother lowered his arm, but continued to smile and laugh at the excited throng of citizens.

"The Siren is not evil, Kellen."

Her eyes watered as Kellen turned to her, the wild smile erased from his face. The crew had tethered the ship to the dock and people began to come aboard so that they might embrace the two Questors.

"Father and Shayim knew it," Kiri said, "and so did you. Father and the Siren were once lovers. She is my mother."

"Was your mother," Kellen said, and he nodded deliberately. "So now you know. And you know she broke many Questral Laws during her training with Father, and aspired to the throne of Larim. It is why, after you were born, father exiled her to Churas."

"You knew before you left for Churas she was my mother" Kiri said.

"My own mother died after giving birth to me. I felt no remorse in attempting to kill the Siren. I failed in my task, but you did not."

"My mother sought to control me on Churas," Kiri said, "but I fought her and she told me the truth. She wanted to leave Churas, and I did exactly what she wanted, but I was stronger and I made her a condition."

"Made a condition? You killed her!"

"No, it is not so. The Siren is not dead."

People clutched at them, shouting to get their attention, but Kiri continued to ignore them.

"I don't understand," Kellen said.

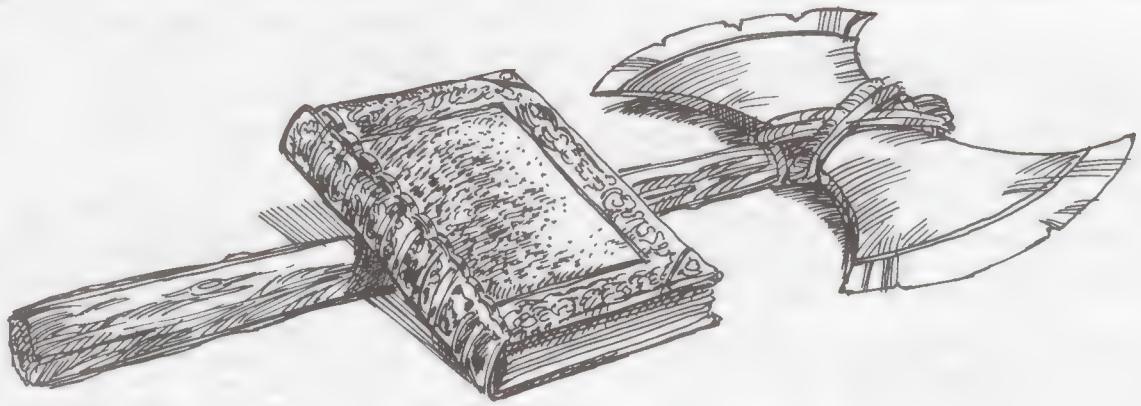
"I'm sorry," she said, staring into his eyes, "but Larim needs the Siren's power and experience, her knowledge of the world away from the City of Castles. Larim needs me, too, Kellen, it requires my magic. Let the women continue to fish the Western Sea if they choose; or the men, it doesn't matter. There will be no war with Mrygia. Peace will continue in Larim as long as I am its ruler."

"You—?"

She nodded at Kellen and spoke with confidence. "I will show a sign to you that will grant your understanding."

And with those words, Kiri breathed deep, inhaling fresh sea air. Then she exhaled, and the men on the ship turned their heads toward her in shock, for the breath that left her mouth did so in singing voice, creating a sad, bittersweet song.

❧ *Patrick J. Swenson*



Weal and Woe

by E.R. Stewart

At the edge of a forest of undetermined depths, two brothers met. One, tall and lean, swung an axe casually as he walked. On the axe was blood.

The other brother, short and squat, carried a book. In it, written with the juice of berries, were stories of neither instruction nor explanation, tales of neither edification nor inspiration, poems of neither exhilaration nor despair.

"Of what use," asked Lean, "is the book of yours?"

Shaking his head, Squat smiled. "Does your axe transport you? Does it tell you wonders? Can it make you forget?"

"If I chop off an enemy's head, he forgets. As for transports and wonders, who can live on such foolery?"

And so the brothers passed the afternoon in a familiar argument.

Icewolves, however, pricked up their ears in the forest's chillier shadows at the sounds of the brother's speech, and they began their icewolfish trickle toward prey.

Shuddering, Squat said, "Sun's nearly hidden: we should go."

But Lean, with a strut, asked, "Do you fear the dark?"

In the bushes near the brothers icy forms rippled and flowed, preparing their splash attack, their drenching of unexpected death by which all icewolves feed.

Squat rubbed his upper arms. "I'm cold, not afraid. Surely that's a frailty you'll admit."

"But I'm perfectly comfortable, soft brother."

A bush shivered, some of its leaves dropping unseen in frozen glitters to melt into the loam.

"My breath," Squat said then, gazing at steam in a puff before his face.

And even as the brothers realized what such cold in such a season must portend, the icewolves bounded upward in a silvery wet splash.

Lean took an entire sopping icewolf full on the chest, and as the trickles ranged upon his form he screamed in terror and farewell. Ice formed around him, crushing as it squeezed, snapping bones of ribcage and arms, weighing him until he fell in a mass of motionless pulp gnawed by burning cold, icicle fangs.

Squat, however, stumbled back and held up the book, which proved of less use than his loss of balance as the splash passed by him to rebound upon a tree. Droplets of icewolf in fluid form spattered Squat, but bit only slightly as he rose and ran.

Tears coursed his smooth face. He sobbed out his brother's name as he scampered in breathless rush to the town. Curses flew from him. Stinging pain on his left arm where the spatters worked at him gradually faded as he ran.

"No one," he panted to an elder he chanced to meet by a well outside the town. "No one."

"No one? What is it, lad? Pray catch breath and tell me clear."

Squat plopped down beside the well. He thumped the back of his head on the rounded stones. "My brother is gone." He gulped water from the proffered ladle and gestured back the way he had come. "Icewolves." And he displayed his pocked, oozing arm.

"Your luck thrives," the elder said, eyes wide at the sight of the marks on Squat's arm. "But what of us? Do the icewolves attack? Do they flow to us in a stream even now?"

Squat shrugged. "Perhaps."

And with that the elder began tugging on Squat's undamaged right sleeve. "Come, up with you. We must hurry."

"Flee?" asked Squat, contempt in his tone. "It seems I've fled enough already."

"We must warn the others, get up fires and watches."

Squat rose. "Ah," he said, gazing upward at the few stars

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visible amidst the flocks of high, scudding cloud. "It's duty, then. That makes all the difference, I am sure, to my splashed and splattered brother."

But Squat followed the elder and when the town was properly roused by the bell, there came to him an idea for revenge. Revenge, a concept so new, so daring, that he said nought to any, but moved away from the crowds and the panic and the sober preparations to ponder alone. In alleys near the wall, even rats and mice held breath and hurried, lest they be caught by things pouring now and then over the wall's jagged top.

No sooner had Squat perfected the image in his mind, no sooner had he decided exactly how to go about doing it, than a tremendous roar of hatred and fear arose from the section of town where he and the elder had entered. Rushing forward, Squat found a battle commenced.

Men slashed at splashes, their swords passing through the liquid without harming ought but the blades, which smoked and softened even as their owners attempted to dodge the icewolves.

When on the ground, each icewolf took on the gelid, almost solid, translucent appearance of a real wolf, upon whom they'd feasted when they fell from the cloudless, starless sky that lasted days. Their forms were approximate, their aspects menacing and ferocious.

And they'd leap, and liquify, and slosh into the crowds to bite deep like acid through muscle to the bone, on flesh now motile and oozing.

Squat watched a stream of icewolves rove through a corner of the square, slopping hogs and chickens alike with squealing, deathwet. He saw men wade bravely, only to fall without legs.

Women and children fought, too, tossing powdered clay from baskets to absorb the icewolves. Only a crimson-stained steam resulted, and no icewolf thus dusted was diminished.

Flames, when thrust on brands into the flowing predators, only dwindled and sparked out, and too often the wielder of the torch found an arm engulfed as the icewolf reached a trickle up the wood toward the human's grasp.

As more victims fell and dissolved, the splash attacks lessened in savagery, until finally the icewolves sloshed back, and flow into the unplumbed forest depths. Stricken survivors ran behind, shouting oaths and bawling out their loss of loved ones, their pain.

Squat set his jaw and marched off toward a hill in town where pines grew, where monks huddled at the center of their artificial, symbolic forest. "They'll help or harm me," Squat said, tugging on pine boughs for balance.

A being of neither sex, without hair or expression, wearing only a pair of pine cones over his larynx, stepped before Squat and held up a hand. The monk's head shook.

"Sap," Squat said. "Coat me in pine sap, head to toe."

The monk's hand fell.

"Icewolves have attacked the town. If they overrun the people, they'll come for you. Hunger respects no religion."

The monk turned and walked before Squat until they reached a door set flat in the ground. Three thumps of heel and two of toe caused the door to bump upward.

Another bald head appeared, sexless as the first monk. "Another race," Squat said. He wondered, as did many in the town, if the monks had fallen even when the icewolves had fallen. No one quite remembered when they'd arisen, nor from whence they'd come.

Squat's heart thumped as he descended the stone stairwell into the core of the hill. As his eyes adjusted to the dim flicker of pine-sap lamps, he saw that a dozen or more monks stood around him. He could not see walls, only monks. "Sap," he repeated. "Icewolves consume no plants, only meat and blood and bone. Sap is of plants, and so should insulate me from the splashes."

"And so?"

Squat glanced from one monk to another, trying to see who had spoken to him. None of the sexless faces gave any indication of even noticing him.

And the voice came again,from all directions, none, saying, "Immunity from splashes makes you no threat to them. Would you be a frustration to them only?"

Squat smiled and nodded. "Jars," he said. "Strong clay jars would let me catch them, contain them."

The monks all shifted weight at the same time. Then they dispersed, leaving Squat with but one, which might have been the one who'd shown him into their sanctuary.

This monk led Squat through dark corridors. The monk's palms and cheeks and shoulders gave off gentle, greenish light. Squat suspected firefly salve.

Scents of pine syrup strengthened until Squat's breathing became labored, and then they entered a cauldron room, where huge iron containers held boiling sap over orange fires fed by silent monks. Smoke vanished into the darkness, and Squat wondered where the chimney came out, and why no one in town ever saw any smoke.

"Encasing a body in sap is easy, a mere dipping. Maintaining access to air is somewhat harder. Charms are needed."

The rhythm in the room altered then, and the flame-feeders changed patterns, allowing one of the cauldrons to begin cooling.

Squat's escort walked off, and Squat followed into more dark halls.

They came to a room with a ceiling so low Squat had to lower his head, bow. Irony made him drop to his knees.

At once a shimmering light flared from the room's center, and Squat, when his eyes adjusted, saw three monks standing over a brazier filled with coals that glowed with more colors than he'd ever seen before. Each of the three monks was taller and more wrinkled than the others, and each looked ineffably male.

"Gaze with us," one said, and Squat rose and approached on shaking knees.

He looked into the bowl of coals and saw, between

shimmers, amidst the light and colors, glimpses of the woods, and moving, cavorting waters that could only be icewolves in their lair. Waterfalls where no streams or rivers flowed, pools where no low-spots cupped dew, were icewolf homes.

Squat smelled spices and pine and manure wafting from the coals, although his eyes did not sting and his breathing was not afflicted. But suddenly he dizzied, and before he thought to step back, blackness engulfed him.

Squat's eyes opened to sunlight. He lay sprawled atop the monk's artificial hill, gazing upward through pine boughs.

Rolling over, he saw that the hatch or door was no longer to be seen. He wasted no time seeking it, because other concerns held sway in his mind.

He was encased head to foot in pine sap, for example. And it was not sticky, but hard and cool like amber.

How was he able to breathe? he wondered.

Looking down, he could perceive no holes in the strange armor he now wore. He reached up and touched his face.

Despite the amber armor, his sense of touch was undiminished, even enhanced slightly. He felt a mesh over his nose and mouth.

Weal and Woe

That and the fact that he wasn't awash in sweat inside the amber led him to stop questioning it and begin plans for capturing the icewolves.

He looked around for cauldrons, perhaps on large wheels, or large clay jars, with tight stoppers, in which to capture the icewolves. He saw only a stack of what appeared to be burlap.

Examination revealed man-size wine-skins, with large mouths that sealed at the touch of iron-hard twigs in tension. The mouths snapped open and shut with some violence, and once Squat would surely have lost some fingers, had not the armor protected him.

This pleased him, and he took up the stack of sacks and walked down off the monk's hill. Each step through the town brought more people out to stare at him. Some called his name, others backed away and averted their gaze.

None accompanied him as he left the town walls behind. The gate slammed shut and he did not look back.

In isolation lay stealth, he knew. A herd of angry townsfolk stampeding for revenge would advertise intent and chase the icewolves into mocking flight. Better to appear alone, surprising and unexpected.

Squat clomped up the slight incline leading to the unexplored forest, where echoes played tag, where shadows moved without connection to bodies in light, where icewolves frolicked unaware, unconcerned.

His teeth chattered now and then, at imagined chills. Muscles all over him clenched at odd moments, in unhelpful ways, as if eager to grapple with something more than anticipation.

Squat found spoor. They looked like the beds of tiny rivulets, but he knew icewolves had left the marks. In dust, through grasses parted as if by a comb, and between, among roots of trees and the undergrowth the marks showed that icewolves had there frolicked, played, and otherwise danced their gratification at once more bamboozling humans.

Anger flared, and as quickly puddled into dread as shadows of fountains appeared against a rock.

Whirling, Squat dropped low and jumped to one side in time to avoid the first onslaught. Icewolves prowled a ridge just beyond his reach, and a few liquified and leapt at him even as he fumbled to open a sack.

Into the skin one icewolf flew, but the other slammed into his chest and face hard enough to knock him back. His head struck a tree-trunk but he felt it as if from afar.

Panic entered him then. He swiped and wiped at the remnants of icewolf that glittered on him, and found his insulation working. He sloughed off three more attacks as if icewolves were nought but icewater sprites.

The sack, the skin he'd dropped, now writhed as if alive, containing an icewolf angry, yet trapped.

Now Squat understood that the charms were not just protective, but active in his quest, assisting him. As he opened a sack, an icewolf leapt, flying inward, its weight made Squat drop the sack, which then clamped shut as the sticks renewed their tension embrace.

As the sun bloodied down and the moon shivered up, Squat fought, and although he quickly used up the dozen sack-skins he'd brought, there was always another there when he reached. He breathed heavily, and felt twitches in his fatigue, as if his body warned him not to exceed unspoken limits, but he fought on.

Finally, as the lunar glow bathed him from above the tops of the nearest trees, Squat reached back and found no other sack. He gasped and glanced behind him.

A stack of sacks loomed over him. A hill of them, with only the outermost layer still wriggling, still baying at their captor.

Even as he watched, the sacks resolved into earth, and a new mound bare of moss or grasses took shape.

Squat, for reasons he could never express,sobbed and shed tears at the sight. An inward sense of loss assailed him, and for a time he rested on his knees, staring at the new hill where, he knew, no children would ever play.

Finally he rose and started back to tell the town.

Near the edge he came upon a new stream, flowing clear and strong and almost silent. He forded by wading, and quietly watched as his amber armor dissolved and flowed away.

He felt clean and tired. Thoughts of his brother came to him but did not sadden him anymore, but instead warmed him. He smiled without laughing aloud.

With no threat of icewolves, the forest behind him seemed less dark, less dense. By the time he passed through the gates and hollered up a crowd from the many portals, Squat knew that he wanted to explore the forest, revel in its expanse while still it stood.

"I've taken the icewolves away," he told the people, who scoffed at first, until a group of monks broke through the rear of the crowd to confirm what he said by holding aloft several fresh, ice-clear pelts.

"For weal or woe, I've taken the icewolves away," Squat repeated, "and now they'll take me away, until, if I'm able, I'll return."

"He'll explore," someone whispered. "Find new things."

"He'll die," another countered.

With a nod to both, and a calm smile, Squat drank at the town well one last time and accepted one of the pelts from the monks with a short, quick bow. He took his book from his shirt and gave it to a child, and then walked out of town, through the gates, and into the waiting woods.

❧ *E.R.Stewartt*

Thank You...

I want to thank all of you for your thoughts and prayers when Marion was so sick last week. The pneumonia came on so fast. I can see how Jim Henson didn't survive what we had come to consider a serious but not critical illness. I appreciate the efforts of James M. Turner to immediately alert everyone to help gather the much need support. And we appreciate the offer of help from Chuq Von Rospach, Editor of Other Realms, who is pulling together the upcoming "Short-Short" Issue.

I can see now why Marion has always considered Science Fiction Fandom a real family.

Jan Burke

CONTRIBUTORS

Change

Jo Clayton:

Born: Modesto, California, February 15, 1939 in a hospital they tore down soon afterward.

Raised: on a sandhill my parents homesteaded and called a farm that shook whenever the San Andreas Fault hiccuped. Learned the perversity of nature from the cows I brought in for milking each night and a pinto horse called Chief with a propensity for charging through barbwire fences.

Educated: variously, graduated from University of Southern California with a BA and a California Secondary Teaching Certificate.

Worked: assorted inner cities where my students taught me more than they ever learned from me. Quit after thirteen years only just on the right side of sanity (though I'm not too sure any longer what that side is).

Sold first book 1977 (Diadem from the Stars)

Latest book (Shadowplay) appeared in bookstores April 1990.

A Swim with a Shark

Robert Collins is a proud Kansan who's a fan of Doctor Who, Blake's 7, ElfQuest, and baseball. He's never had a real job, is getting into script-writing, and is on the local community theater Board of Directors. This is not only his first sale, but will be the first time he's ever seen the magazine. He is not related to any famous Collins, but wishes he was.

"No Nice Way To Put It"

Parke Godwin is best known for his Arthurian novels, FIRELORD, BELOVED EXILE and THE LAST RAINBOW. Later he turned to comedy-satire in WAITING FOR THE GALACTIC BUS and its sequel THE SNAKE OIL WARS. In 1982 he won the World Fantasy Award for his novelet THE FIRE WHEN IT COMES. His short story INFLUENCING THE HELL OUT OF TIME AND TERESA GOLOWITZ was dramatized on the new *Twilight Zone* series in 1987. He is currently working on GREYFEATHER, a novel of Robin Hood set against the background of the Norman Conquest.

Time to Diet

Larry Hodges:

I'm probably one of the only students in the U.S. working his way through college by writing fantasy stories and winning table tennis tournaments. Time to Diet is my third sale to MZB's, and my 13th overall. Last week I won the Casper Table Tennis Open in Wyoming, my 12th open singles title. As you can see, fantasy writing is in the lead.

I also edit (and mostly write) a small magazine called Table Tennis Coaches Quarterly. It is fortunate that I like writing fantasy as the demand for table tennis writers is rather limited.

I have a degree in math which has helped me enormously in numbering pages. I am now taking journalism classes full time, and perhaps someday I will combine fantasy and journalism and work for the National Enquirer.

Hubert the Barbarian

Martin Levy:

Many years ago (20+) I was reading a Stan Lee comic (Fantastic Four or Avengers, I think) in which one of the characters said "The Hobbit" was a great book. I'd never heard of it at the time but based on the comic book character's recommendation I promptly went out and bought it. I've been hooked on "Fantasy" ever since. I no longer read comics but I'm always reading a fantasy book of some sort and continually have a pile of several books waiting to be read.

This is my first fiction publication and I'm as thrilled as I can be about it. "Hubert ..." was originally written about 12 years ago for recreational purposes. A few years ago I decided to see if I could get it published and I've been tweaking the story ever since. I've also written a couple of other short stories and even started a novel and every few years I revisit them. MAB may have given me the kick in the !!! I needed to get more serious about my writing.

In my real life I'm a manager of Human Resources for an aerospace company and have published several "professional" articles.

Caela and the Deamon Spawn

John S. Manor:

After learning that I had sold "Caela and the Daemon Spawn" to MZBs Fantasy Magazine I caused quite a stir in my neighborhood by running down the middle of the street in my pajamas waving a copy of the magazine and shouting "By the Goddess, I did it, I did it!" I am still trying to think of a rational explanation for this to give to my neighbors.

I am a life-long resident of Long Island, New York, where I live with my wife Susan, my sixteen-month old son Kevin and our dog Ben. My wife has accepted it and has promised me she will have bronzed my first check or a fiction sale. My other interests include stargazing with my telescopes, playing all kinds of computer games and playing with my son. For the last three years I have written reviews of computer games for various magazines. Between the hundred of game boxes and my fantasy and science fiction books and magazines my side room is quite a sight.

I started reading science fiction and fantasy in junior high, enjoying the works of Isaac Asimov and Ray Bradbury in particular. It was a happy day when I picked up a Darkover anthology to read. That and the Sword and Sorceress anthologies made me want to try writing fantasy though I had read authors like Stephen R. Donaldson. Marion's essays in Fantasy Magazine and the anthologies, as well as her kind rejection slips, have helped me to improve my writing and to keep on writing.

I have a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Dowling College. Two years ago I took a non-credit course in novel writing. I just want to mention that my instructor, who taught me the basics of writing and selling fiction and encouraged me to do both (thank you, Gloria), wrote a fantastic story that I have always loved. It was made into the Twilight Zone teleplay, "Time Enough At Last", starring

CONTRIBUTORS, continued.

Burgess Meredith as a man who loves to read and who breaks his glasses.

I got the idea for "Caela..." when I was in New York City. I saw a young, well-dressed businesswoman with briefcase in hand and wondered what she would be like if she was a sorceress. I hope everyone enjoys the story. For all I know, she may really be one. "Caela ..." is my first fiction tale.

Son of the Sun

Patricia Shaw Mathews:

I am a Southwestern, self-employed accountant with two grown daughters, a 2-seater Honda car, and two cats, and have been a science fiction fan for forty years.

I call Marion my literary godmother. My first ever publication was in Marion Zimmer Bradley's STARSTONE fanzine, which led directly to my first professional sale in DAWs Darkover fanthology KEEPER's PRICE & OTHER STORIES. In time, she bought others, leading to a string of successes that gave me the confidence to continue. My first original-universe story came out in her anthology GREYHAVEN. Thanks, Marion.

I have a Witch World story, "Falcon's Chick", coming out in TALES OF THE WITCH WORLD VOLUME 3, (Tor, hardback) in July of this year.

Son of the Sun was inspired by a Melanesian custom described in Joseph Campbell's PRIMITIVE MYTHOLOGY (p.428-9 if you're interested). I just thought the situation through and told the resulting story.

Power of the Peaks

Gregory Remington was born October 2, 1948, in Hayward, Wisconsin. Aside from intervals in Indiana and Wyoming for periods of schooling and such, he has lived in Northwest Wisconsin all his life. He began writing in 1987. He has never before used a FAX machine.

Julio's Rock

Barbara Rosen:

If the classroom in "Julio's Rock" sounds authentic, it was. All the children were based on my first graders that year, although I'm happy to report that the real Julio was a perfectly nice kid.

I had to stop teaching this year because I came down with a chronic fatigue syndrome; I'm now starting a second career as an artist.

Aside from painting and writing I study voice, sing in an excellent choir and take in stray cats and dogs.

Weal and Woe

E.R. Stewart: Born on Charles Dickens' 146th birthday in Altoona, Pennsylvania, E R Stewart retired from show business following his farewell performance magic show in kindergarten. He turned to writing at age eight and published poems at age 12. For a high school graduation present, his uncle, an army first sergeant, invited him to visit in Germany, where he saw firsthand some of our border fortifications. In 1980, he married an Air Force officer and his lived in and toured many states and countries, most notably four years in Northern Japan and an extended vacation in Canada. While in Japan, his first son, Scott, was born on the Fourth of July. In keeping with the military theme, another child is expected this Memorial Day. E R Stewart's published works include nonfiction appearing in Military Lifestyles, Pennsylvania Angler, Macon, and Family magazines as well as Thrust SF (now called Quantum), and Prime Times. "Weal and Woe" is his first published fiction. He has recently turned in a novella to be included in one of Baen Books' WAR WORLD anthologies by Jerry Pournelle and John F. Carr and has placed other fiction with them as well. E R Stewart's hobbies include art, photography, and music. He plays guitar and is currently studying jazz flute.

The Siren

Patrick J. Swenson:

I grew up in Montana, near beautiful Glacier Park and the Flathead Valley; the outdoors has always been important to me: skiing, water-skiing, tennis, golf, hiking and climbing. I came to Seattle for college and have been living in the area for the past twelve years. For the past eight I've taught high school music—specifically, I am the director of three bands. I also teach a few classes of freshman English. One night a week I direct a community band. In the summers I occasionally work for a resort in the rain forest on Washington's Olympic Peninsula. (It paid for the computer I'm writing this on!). It's like a working vacation, and I do get time to write.

I have also dabbled in music composition, my last effort being a twenty minute, five movement band piece based loosely on the famous s-f novel A Canticle For Leibowitz. My high school and the community bands performed it last year. A six projector slide show went with the performance.

Music's been my life, (and not surprisingly, many of my stories have music of some kind or another in them) but becoming a successful writer is my biggest goal. I've been reading and writing s-f and fantasy in some form or another since I was in second grade (my first blockbuster, complete with self-drawn color illustrations, was "Mr. Mooney Goes To the Moon!" Can you imagine moon creatures living in a castle shaped like a bowl of fruit?!).

I hope to continue to stay on target, writing, writing, writing. I belong to a writer's group, and that helps. I also attend cons—it's a great way to meet editors! I passed the big "three-oh" a year ago (depressing), but am managing to make the best of it. I hope to settle down someday with the right person, produce some baby musicians and writer's who'll make their daddy proud.

Silver Eyes

Laura Todd: Raised in State College, Penn. Laura grew-up with the woods at her back door, and they are now being bulldozed!!! She has always loved nature and considers herself an earth worshiper. After attending Penn State and majoring in anthropology and art, Laura went on to become a nurse, and now practices nursing part-time, in between writting and raising her three children ages 3,7 and 9 years old. *Silver Eyes* is her first sale! We wish her well on her novel "The Way of the Crystal" a story of a post necular femanist pacifist messiah - which is now making the rounds at the publishers. ❧

Time to Diet

by Larry Hodges

Humphrey walked slowly down the dark street, head down, gobs of fat roling gently from side to side. His weight wore him down even more than normal in this moment of sorrow.

He'd been turned down for the piloting position at Carpet Fliers. Again. The ticket to a good life, gone.

It wasn't that he wasn't qualified. He was experienced. He'd piloted carpets half his life, and had earned the best of marks. When it came to taking carpets in for landings—the trickiest part—none but the best could touch Humphrey. No, that wasn't the problem. It was something else.

He was fat.

It wasn't that the huge commercial carpets couldn't take him up. But it took twice as much flying powder to raise a four-hundred pound man as one who weighed two-hundred.

Humphrey had tried dieting, but it just hadn't worked out. He'd stick to the diet for a few days, sometimes even a few weeks. But he could never keep it up. He'd given up on himself.

He was a bum.

Even in his funk, Humphrey detected a sudden motion from a block away. Someone was moving stealthily towards him. You just weren't safe anymore, not with the legalization of laser stones. There just weren't enough policemen to patrol the streets.

"Hey bud!"

Humphrey didn't wait to see what the man wanted. He ducked into the nearest doorway, barely fitting his huge frame through it, and slammed the door shut. He was safe.

"Can I help you?" Humphrey looked up, startled. It was the proprietor of the store he'd entered. A tiny little man with snow white hair and waves upon waves of wrinkles. "You look rather troubled," the old man continued.

"Someone was after me," Humphrey replied, breathlessly.

"Well, while you are in here, perhaps I can interest you in a few stones?"

Humphrey looked around and noted the shelves and shelves of stones along the walls. Magic stones. There were undoubtedly some he could use, but most seemed outside his price range. Except for a few low paying menial jobs, he'd been unemployed for years, since his weight had cost him his piloting job. Humphrey sighed.

"You might be interested in this reducing stone," the man said. "Guaranteed to take off up to a hundred pounds a week, with no side effects other than baggy clothing. What'd' ya say?"

Humphrey was definitely interested in this one. But he'd never heard of this new item, and he read all the dieting magazines. "How come I never heard of one of these?" he asked, fondling the reducing stone in his hand.

"It's a new item. Normally, it costs five hundred zewls, but I can let you have it for two hundred." The storekeeper leaned closer, and whispered as if there was someone listening. "I got a special deal last month, but my source won't give me more unless I prove I got a market. So I'm selling it at cost. What'd'ya say? I'll take it," Humphrey decided. He put the stone on the counter and got out his wallet. The shopkeeper opened the cash register. Soon the deal was made. The shopkeeper wrapped the reducing stone in a bag and handed it to Humphrey. Humphrey reached for it hungrily.

But they missed the connection. The shopkeeper let go of the bag before Humphrey had it in his hand. The bag dropped. There was a sickening sound of something shattering. Both men stared. The shopkeeper knelt down and poured out the contents of the bag. The stone was broken into a number of small shards.

"You dropped it, you fat oaf!" the shopkeeper cried, shaking his finger at him. "It was in your hand!"

"You let go too soon!" Humphrey cried in despair. He dropped to the floor and grabbed the shards. "You have another one, don't you?"

"That was my only one! And there won't be any more coming—I'm retiring next month."

Humphrey's shoulders slumped. He couldn't wait that long! He began to slowly shuffle to the door, his mind in a daze. Nothing went right for him. If he had been a dog, his tail would have been between his legs. Being a human, he just stared at his feet.

"Hey, look, I'm sorry about what happened," the shopkeeper called out to him. "And about what I called you. Look, I don't have any more reducing stones, but how about if I give you something else in its place?"

When Humphrey didn't answer, the shopkeeper came around the counter and ran after him. "Look, take this. I don't want any unsatisfied customers. This is the least I can do."

"What is it?" Humphrey asked.

"It's a time stone. Guaranteed by the Wizard's council. Guaranteed immunity to the user. It's really worth more than the reducing stone, but I got a good supply of these. I can let one go. What'd'ya say?"

It wasn't what Humphrey wanted, but with the reducer stone destroyed, what could he do? Time stones could be useful. Besides, if he didn't take it, the storekeeper would be insulted.

"I'll take it," he finally said. The storekeeper was all smiles as he handed over the stone.

Humphrey opened the door carefully and peeked outside. It looked clear. Holding the stone in his hand,

Time To Diet

he stepped out into the night.

"Stop right there and hand over that pretty stone!" A man in a dark cape stepped out from where he had been hiding, pressed against the wall. He held up a laser stone and pointed it at Humphrey's stomach. "Hand it over, very slowly."

"Time stop!" Humphrey called out. The stone flashed.

"No!" the caped man shouted. "Fire!" A ray shot out of the man's laser stone, straight at Humphrey.

And stopped, about six inches from his stomach. Humphrey stood still for a good minute, frozen with fright. But the time stone had worked!

Humphrey remained frozen in fright, seemingly. He tried to move, but was unable to. He wasn't exactly the hero type, but nothing in his life had scared him to absolute immobility.

After many attempts at movement it finally dawned on him. It was the stone! It had stopped all time, with immunity to the owner, as guaranteed. But that meant that everything—everything!—except himself was locked in this one instant of time. Nothing could move, other than himself.

He was trapped in a prison of air molecules, smoothly formed around his body. Each molecule was firmly stuck in place, frozen in time and space. He could squirm his body about, but the air molecules would not give.

It was a situation that should be easy to remedy. All he had to do was say "Time start!" and he would be free. His mouth had been slightly open at the time time had stopped, and although he couldn't move his mouth much, he could get the words out.

"Time s--" he began, but suddenly his eyes fell to the beam of light that extended from the caped man's laser stone to his stomach. If time started up now, there would be nothing to stop that beam! And he'd almost said the words!

Now he was really trapped. He could start time at any moment he chose to die. Or he could stay in his prison forever, with the laser beam always bearing down on him, ready to strike, but always six inches short. What was a man to do?

The caped man leaped out from where he had been hiding,squeezed up against the wall. It'd been a bad week. Five holdups had netted him less than a hundred zewls. People didn't carry money around like they used to! It was enough to drive a crook to drink.

He'd spied a fat man walking down the street and decided to follow. Fat people usually were pretty well off—they had to be, to afford lots of food! And so he'd waited outside the shop for the man to come out. The shiny stone in the palm of the man looked valuable. Perhaps this was his lucky day!

"Stop right there and hand over the pretty stone!" he said as he held up his laser stone and aimed it at the man's stomach. "Hand it over very slowly."

The fat man looked at him, eyes wide, then held up the gem; "Time stop!" A second later the gem flashed.

"No!" Then, recovering, the caped man yelled, "Fire!" A beam of light shot out from his laser stone, straight toward the fat man's belly. The caped man watched as the beam was about to strike, ready to see guts ripped apart and seared.

But where the fat man should have been standing, or rather laying in a smoldering mass, a thin man in baggy clothes stood, just off to the side of his laser beam. The caped man rubbed his eyes, not believing what he was seeing then tried to turn the beam to get this new person, but he wasn't fast enough. The baggy clothed man knocked the laser stone from his hand.

"Who—what—" the caped man stammered, then backed away, turned, and ran. He wanted none of this.

Humphrey stooped to pick up the laser stone. Perhaps he could sell it sometime, along with the time stone. He really didn't need either. Especially now, with his job prospects so good. He'd re-apply for the carpet pilot position, and he had no doubt he'd be hired, trim as he was.

He'd been trapped for a long time, staring at death just inches away. It'd gone on like that for what seemed like forever. But finally, with no food available, the enforced diet had taken hold, and his size had dramatically diminished. But the size of his prison stayed the same and so each day he was able to move about a little more than the day before. When the day came that he was able to squirm out of the way of the laser beam, he'd squeezed to one side, started up time, and watched the beam narrowly miss him. Now he was off to the employment office and that piloting job.

But first he had to get something to eat. He hadn't eaten in ages! He knew a great steak place that had the best steak sauce. And fries and a milk shake! He jogged to the restaurant, admiring how his now thin body moved so well. He pulled up a chair at the bar.

"What'll it be, Handsome?" the gorgeous waitress asked.

Humphrey looked around trying to figure out who she was talking to. There was no one else about, so it could only be him. Handsome? Him? Wow!

"I'll have a salad," He said confidently. "No dressing."

Larry Hodges

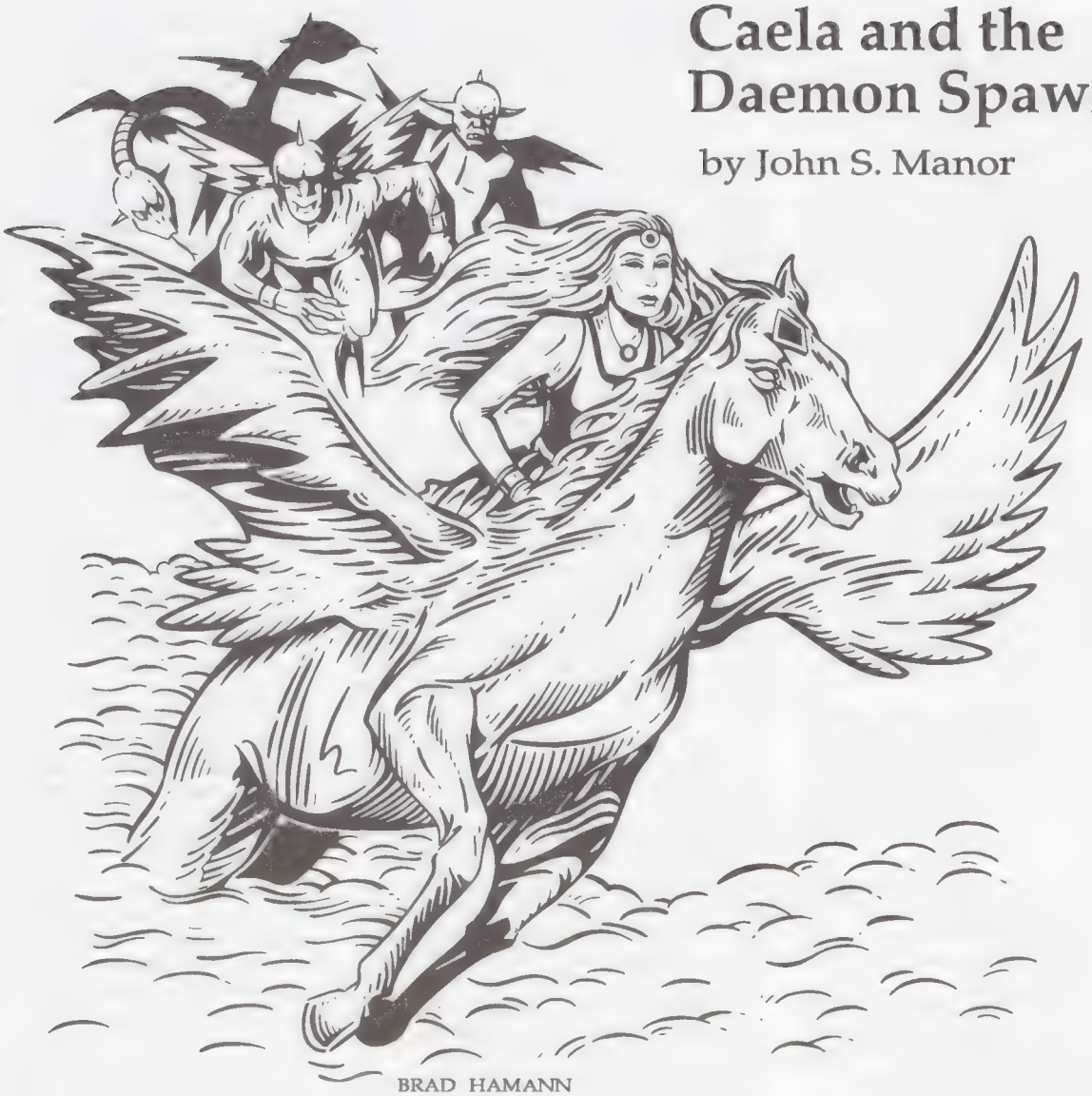
Department of We Goofed:

◆ It's been called to my attention that I stated in the last issue that the deadline for **Sword & Sorceress #8** was July 1, 1990. It's actually ***June 15, 1990***—so sue me, but get your stories in by June 15th! *–MZB*

◆ Because of the shortened time from last issue to this, we are holding the final **Cauldron** vote. Get your votes in ASAP, the winners will be published next issue. -jlb

Caela and the Daemon Spawn

by John S. Manor



BRAD HAMANN

"We'll all be fired for sure!" Terrence moaned as Caela sat at her desk, her hands folded in front of her. The morning had started off badly with her train twenty minutes late. It had gotten worse from there on.

We've lost accounts before," she said as she smoothed back her black hair with just a trace of white in it.

But Terrence was inconsolable. He was Caela's creative genius when it came to new advertising campaigns, but sometimes he was hard to live with.

"I've got thirteen years with Abrams, Forge and Steele. Gone. All gone."

"Well, at least you're better off than poor Stu Wrightman from shipping," Caela offered. "His freak accident at the baseball park made the papers."

"The whole place is going to hell I tell you! We're doomed, doomed!", Terrence said and stomped off, slamming the door to her office behind him.

Caela put down the invoices she was going over and followed Terrence out. She turned right and made her way into the washroom. She needed to be alone for awhile.

In the restroom stall, Caela sat down and held the emerald studded gold medallion hanging at her neck. It was worked intricately with serpentine markings winding around its outer edges. She watched her distorted reflection in its polished surface. "What do you want from me? What? I can't do it anymore. I can't." She stroked it, remembering.

Her mother Adreema had said through tears, *Caela, my beautiful child, it hurts me so, but I must leave this land of Asgard to be with your father. I belong at his side. You are of age now, so I give you this,* and pressed the hard, cold medallion into her hand. It had begun to warm almost immediately. Caela had watched, unable to tear her eyes away, as the emerald in its center glowed and pulsed to her own heartbeat. From that moment on the Gods had owned her. Then, gently lifting her daughter's chin in her hand she raised her

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daughter's hazel eyes to meet her own.

My daughter, a stern quality in her voice, *I give you Godhood, to mix with your half-mortal blood. I do this in honor of your father's living memory. One warning I must give you. You are beautiful beyond beauty and a God, but when in the mortal realm, you will be mortal. I will leave you now, but remember always how we loved you.*

Caela squeezed the medallion until it cut into her hand, drawing blood, and cried bitter tears.

In the years since that moment, Asgard had found many uses for a demi-god who traveled often in the mortal world. She had protested to Jaro, Lord over all the immortals, against the way she was used, to no avail. "You must aid Asgard against evil Loki's forces," he insisted. "You must come when called. Someday, I promise, you will have a life of your own."

Caela rebelled. She refused a summons and Jaro's anger fell on her like hot rain. Many mortals around her suffered from earthly evils left unchecked by the angered Lord of Asgard. Caela no longer had any choice.

She spoke to no one in a ragged voice just above a whisper. "Okay. One more time. I'll do it one more time. For Stu and Terrence and the others. But no more. You hear? No more."

Caela held the medallion out before her and stared into the emerald center. "By the winds of Valhalla, by the wings of Mercury, by the strength of Mitor, son of Thor, through the shades of the Los Hells and the Heights of Asgard, I command thee and obey thee. I, Caela, daughter of Zethys unto the fortieth generation, return to thee."

The wash room was gone in a misty haze. She felt neither cold nor heat. She blinked and found she stood on a gently sloping hillside in the summer sun. The air was sweet and clean, the sky clear. Before her, in he broad green valley below, she saw the white marble buildings of Senera. Wild horses grazed nearby. She walked over to and beckoned her favorite, Jahpeth, black as coal.

"Easy boy. Easy," Caela said as she stroked his muzzle and along his broad side. Jahpeth seemed to luxuriate in her attention.

"Ah, Caela. It's been too long." Jahpeth turned his head. "I'm ready to go."

Caela jumped onto Jahpeth's back and took firm hold of his silky mane. They started off at a slow trot. "It has been a long time, Jahpeth. But coming back to this world ... it's so hard sometimes."

"I know Caela, I know. But it is necessary. The world is not what it was even a scant century ago. Now you are needed. Hoht-loki was banished, but his spawn awakens in mountainous Ramanon."

Caela was aggrieved to hear that the enemy of human kind still had power on the heights of Asgard, though he dwelt in the lowest of low places, covered with gnawing leeches and in eternal agony from his loss of a God's place on the right hand of Asgard's ruler.

"But I am half-human." It was an unnecessary statement.

Jahpeth snorted with irritation. "And you are half a God as well. Do not forget who your mother was."

Caela wished they could talk of something else. Two birds flew playfully overhead, weaving in and out and around each other. Caela gave Jahpeth a kick in the ribs. "Enough talk. It's also been too long since we've played our game."

"Oh, so that's what you have come back for. I thought it was your godly sense of duty, rather than your mortal love of sport. Very well. Now!"

With a surge of power and a cry of triumphant Godhead, Jahpeth lept high into the sky, far above Senera, so near the sun that it made Caela think of lost Icarus, that wonderful, brave, tragic fool. He had made her proud to be half-human.

"Higher! Higher Jahpeth. We need to touch near the moon, wake the Goddess herself from her frozen sleep."

The wind pulled Caela's long black hair behind her. She bent low beside Jahpeth's ears, yelling at the top of her lungs to be heard. "Okay. This is far enough. Should I say it, I will work you one miracle. If it's you who says the words first, then you must come back with me to the mortal realm when I am done here. Agreed?"

"Agreed." And without further word of warning or a betraying flicker of muscle, Jahpeth threw them into a deadly dive toward the ground below.

"That's not faairrr!" Caela cried as she struggled to maintain her place on Jahpeth's back. She threw both arms around his thick neck in a desperate move to stay mounted. The ground was rushing up at them with a sickening speed, ready to swallow them whole in a single gulp.

Jahpeth winnied and tossed his head back. "Say it! Say it before it's too late!"

"No! Never. You say it, or we'll crash on those rocks!"

Caela, in a devious move, called on the name of the God of rocks and stones and added a special spell.

Jahpeth's eyes rolled in their sockets when he looked down. The houses and farms were clearly visible again and growing in size. Directly below, a mountainous pile of jagged grey rocks.

"Say the words! Say them!" Caela screamed out joyously into the wind.

"Never!" Jahpeth yelled as they dove ever faster, straight at the mountain. "I'll take us both to deepest hell first!"

Caela could feel she was close to winning, closer than she had ever come. But the fear was building inside her stomach, spreading to her chest. She had to think fast. The undulating countryside spread out around them now she could no longer glimpse the horizon.

Leaning closer to Jahpeth's ear she said, "But you know what those rocks conceal that no hell has?" She felt his body stiffen slightly, they were moments from crashing. "Snakes," she said.

With a whinnying cry, Jahpeth pawed at the air before him and screamed. "By Woden's beard and Loki's teeth! I pledge you my service!" With a graceful, and quick, turn of his mighty body, Jahpeth tore them out of the dive and threw them into a steep climb into the sky. He landed on the nearby hillock where Caela had appeared.

Out of breath, Caela lay flat on Jahpeth's back. Her friend's sides heaved from exertion. She rolled off him finally, and lay in the deep grass, looking up at a lone cloud scut across the sky.

"Well done, my friend. Well done, indeed." Jahpath stood over her, brushing his muzzle against her side. "Though you should not complain now about being fair. Snakes! Huh! How did you know I was afraid of snakes?"

Caela sat up, grinning as she struggled to regain her breath. "Aren't ...aren't all horses afraid of snakes? Even a god?"

They laughed together and rested until it was time to journey into Senera.

Jaro sat on his tall throne of silver, leaning on the knuckles of one hand, a black cloud of misery over his head. A white-robed acolyte brought an umbrella from behind the throne as rain began to fall. Flashes of lightening lit the room.

"So Caela," Jaro said, his voice rumbling as thunder, "you finally deigned it time to answer my summons."

Caela did not bow. She stood silent a moment, then spoke with a cool, even voice learned from years of executive

board meetings with mortals. "I have come as commanded sire."

"And well you should," Jaro clapped his hands and the room shook with each impact. "Bring my scepter!" he bellowed. Immediately, two young priestesses appeared from a side hallway, bearing the scepter. Jaro took it and turned to Caela. "Caela, daughter of my lost friend Bergenon Kasala, my finest half-mortal witch, I have something important that needs to be done, and I have chosen you, for I believe only you could possibly succeed at this task.

"Your mother Adreema, and her mother before her served me well. But you are of your own generation, the first in over a hundred generations to dwell among mortals. I have allowed this for a good cause. The forces of Evil Loki once again plan war against Asgard, but now they also seek dominion over all mortal realms as well. It is an Apocalypse of Creation they seek. To destroy all and bring Creation down to their level of evil. You are my most trusted and beloved demi-god. You and Jahpeth are therefore charged with our first move in this war. I give you the task of seeking out, capturing and returning alive to Asgard a Daemon Spawn, for a purpose I will explain later. If you are captured, the less you know the better."

Caela gasped, taken aback by the mission they were being charged with. "Lord, we hear and obey," she said, keeping her voice steady. Her hands shook where they caressed Jahpeth. She stroked harder, hoping they would cease their trembling. She cleared her throat and spoke louder, hoping it would help even her voice. "When ... when shall we depart on our mission?"

Jaro's answer was terse and immediate. "At once. There can be no delay. Already Mount Ramanon quakes with the marching of dark foot soldiers beneath it."

"Yes Lord," she answered. "Does our Lord wish us to go alone, or shall we summon angels, or perhaps the Holy militia?"

The dark storm clouds were gathering again over Jaro's head. "You must go alone, the two of you. The approach of an army would warn Loki's generals and end your usefulness. You are my agents and my spies. You must go along and you must not return having failed."

Caela bowed and turned to guide Jahpeth out, her legs feeling weak beneath her. Jahpeth followed dociley.

Outside the temple Caela sat on a marble bench absently stroking Jahpeth's muzzle. He nudged her gently with his nose, seeking and giving comfort at the same time. "We are not to return if we fail," she said to no one, "That is hardly necessary since if we fail we will be trapped forever in Hell."

"Perhaps there is another way?" Jahpeth asked, pleadingly, "We cannot enter Hell."

"We can and must go there," Caela said evenly, "through Mount Ramanon. There is an entrance, ancient and all but forgotten, at the top of the Mount. So close to the sky is it that few know about it."

Caela rose and purposefully mounted Jahpeth's back. Touching her medallion, Caela yelled out defiantly, drawing annoyed and skeptical looks from the passing crowds; "To Mount Ramanon then, Jahpeth. For Asgard, for Woden, for all that is holy!" Jahpeth bolted into the green sky, leaving the earth far behind, turning north, toward where the ground itself trembled.

"How will be know when we've found a Spawn?" Jahpeth took a step closer to the cave entrance atop Mount Ramanon.

"Daemon Spawn are ugly little creatives with long, snakelike necks, big ears and sharp teeth. They have thick fur and walk on two legs. But those are their only good points." Caela walked up a slope to stand beside Jahpeth. "They eat flesh, living flesh if possible. And they don't like people who try to capture them."

Caela surveyed the cave opening, noting the snarled thorntrees that guarded it. "It looks like we may have to fight out way into Hell," Caela said. The thorns pointed inward and were exceedingly sharp. The thorns stirred as Caela and Jahpeth got to within a few feet of the trees. Then the trees rustled and slowly moved aside.

Surprised, Caela walked cautiously up to the cavemouth. The trees stayed at the sides. "Well, I guess our first problem is solved for us. Come on."

They heard a low growl and the thorntrees moved back into position behind them, guarding the entrance. They were nowtrapped in Hell.

The cave seemed quite ordinary to Jahpeth, even though it was dark, the thorntrees cutting off most of the light from outside.

"Now, if we can just find the way to First Hell," Caela said, trying not to look scared, "we can find a Spawn and then get out of here as fast as possible."

Caela took a pack from Jahpeth's back and opened it. She drew out a long paper scroll. "We should be able to find our way with this map taken from Loki." She snapped her fingers over her head and a light shone above them so she could read. "According to the map we are here at Hellsmouth. First Hell is right below us. The map shows an entrance over that way." She pointed slightly to her left. "Let's go."

They walked over to the left corner of the cave. Caela could see nothing there. No entrance.

Caela studies the map again. "The map shows us an entrance that is not there. Perhaps it is invisible." She touched the medallion and whispered an incantation to make invisible objects appear.

"There! See? An entrance, or a doorway in the floor. Under those stones." She cleared away a pile of loose stones in a corner of the cave and there was a wooden door beneath them.

"Caela, do you think it's wise to blindly open that door, unprepared?" Jahpeth said. "This is Hell, remember, not Asgard."

Caela nodded her approval. "As you say, we should prepare."

Taking a small stone from the floor, Caela drew a wide circle in the earth around Jahpeth and then one around herself. Placing her medallion on each circle in turn, she chanted; "Evil shall not pass. By all the skies of all the worlds, I, Caela, command it."

The air shimmered and glowed faintly grey around them. "See the evil already omnipresent in even Hellsmouth? It rubs against our shields, trying to get through, but it is too weak here."

Caela reached down to lift the door open. A low rumbling filled the air. Jahpeth pranced nervously.

"Caela, I don't think you should ..."

The ground melted beneath them and they fell for what seemed to Caela an interminable time. A hot wind blew by Caela's face as she tumbled.

It was dark where they landed, their shields protecting them from the fall. "Jahpeth, are you there?" Caela called. A quick prayer brought a hand lantern into being in Caela's right hand. She held it high and its light reached out and broke over Jahpeth, who stood a dozen feet to her right. He seemed dazed. Caela looked around them. She could see a huge cavern with a ceiling as high as the night sky. Precious stones gleamed in it like stars. She saw that she straddled a winding path. Ahead of them was an old hut, made of wood and straw. How it survived the heat of the place Caela didn't know. She shrugged. "I think we're in First Hell now," she said.

It could be no other place. Caela watched crystal sparks of flame tingle against her shield. The walls of the cavern had a golden red glow and her skin felt hot even through the shield.

"Name your sins and request your punishment. Hell is wise and merciful. Fear not."

Caela...

Caela whirled about and looked into the broad, flat face of a Daemon. Green slanted cat's eyes squinted back at her. The Daemon was, to her surprise, slightly less than five feet tall and covered with a fine matte of dark hair. It sat on a flat rock. At a glance she knew it was a powerful creature; muscular, quick and well versed in the use of evil spells. She was in the presence of one as powerful as herself, or maybe even more powerful.

Quickly, she chose a sin. "Vanity."

"Well-chosen, oh mortal. Hell is wise and merciful. Fear not. Now name your punishment."

"I want to meet a Daemon Spawn," Caela said cooly.

The Daemon's eyes widened and his massive jaw fell open, showing the rows of jagged white teeth within. His mouth closed with a loud snap. "You want to do what? he hissed.

Caela repeated her request. "I want to meet a Daemon Spawn."

The Daemon shook his head in wonder, as if he couldn't believe what his huge ears heard.

"Impossible," he said finally. "Utterly impossible. Contrary to what you mortals believe, Hell is a supremely fair place. The punishment must suit the sin and the person sinning. There is no reprieve after a punishment is granted. Ever. So Hell has to be fair. Now, if you chose instead to spend eternity in a maze of broken mirrors, or to watch yourself age rapidly over and over again, that would be fair. But for you to meet a Daemon Spawn, that would not be fair. Sorry, can't do it. It's against the rules."

It was Caela's turn to be stunned. She had, after all, perhaps chosen the wrong sin.

"Well, what if I choose another sin? Could I meet a Spawn then?"

The Daemon crossed his arms and then stroked the tuft of coarse hairs hanging from his long chin with the crooked fingers of one hand. "Maybe. What other sins have you committed?"

"Adultery," she offered.

"Too paltry and common."

"Covetousness?"

"Can't be bothered."

"Taking the Lord's name in vain?" she tried, desperate.

"Really? Come, come. You have to give me a better sin than any of those."

"Well, what does anybody do who gets to meet a Daemon Spawn? Maybe I'm as guilty as they are, but not aware of it."

"I don't know, I guess mass murderers mostly are what we look for. You're not a mass murderer are you?"

Caela shook her head.

"No, I didn't think so." The Daemon sighed and scratched himself, starting to tire of the game. ":Well, you case might be unusual, I could take you to me Master for an Interview." The Daemon leaned forward and added in a conspiratorial whisper, "Does that sound okay?"

The shield around Caela glowed hotter where the Daemon's breath hit it. She pulled away reflexively. "Yes ... by all means, that will be fine. When can we be ... interviewed?"

"Right now! Follow me." The Daemon jumped down off its perch and walked up the path to the thatched hut.

Caela crossed the threshold of the hut and the sudden coolness of the air within almost caused her to faint. Hell seemed to stop at the door through which they had just passed. The hut was quite ordinary, just a single large room. Caela noticed that the Daemon did not follow them in, but waited outside the door, on guard. Jahpeth ducked his head to enter the low doorway.

"Name." It was a harsh, nasal voice that spoke.

A high mahogany desk, almost a pulpit it was so tall, stood before them. At it Caela could see a squat, shriveled figure in a frayed black robe, the hood pulled off and showing a bald pate atop thick glasses and a long, pointed nose.

"Name!" the figure said again with an imperious tone. Piercing eyes; black pinpoints in two round white balls, glared at her.

"Caela Kasala," she said, holding his gaze with an effort of will. He dismissed her with a cluck of his tongue and bent to a page on an open book in front of him.

"Let me see. Carla Kasala, Carla, Carla. No, no Carla's here today. Sorry. Goodbye."

Looking at the pair of damned souls over his glasses, the Master shifted his gaze from Caela to Jahpeth. "Excuse me, if you don't mind." He focused his gaze on Jahpeth. "What is your name, sir?"

Caela gave her companion a doubtful look. "Give him your name. What can it hurt?"

"Jahpeth," Jahpeth said. "No last name."

The Master turned a page of the book and scanned it slowly, pursing his thin lips as he searched. "Yes, hmmm," he said under his breath. "Yes, here you are. Jahpeth. Descendant of the Equine Gods. Currently lives in Senera, near Asgard Nice place, a little expensive. Subject is on a mission for Jaro, God of all deities, crowned king of immortals. Subject traveling with one Caela Kasala." He looked up at Jahpeth. "Where's your fellow spy?"

Jahpeth didn't know what to say. They were found out, their mission was over!

Caela took one step forward. "I am the Caela you speak of," she said.

"Ah, yes. Well, Carla, Caela, they sound the same." Instead of calling for the Daemon to come and take them to the deepest parts of Hell, the Master merely licked a long finger, turned another page in the book, and began to write, slowly and meticulously as he spoke.

"Very well then. What do you both want in Hell? It's not a place Gods often visit. I suppose it's important to you and no doubt deadly boring to me."

Caela cleared her throat to speak. Perhaps she could get him to help after all. She approached the desk, touching her medallion and readying a Persuasion spell.

The Master gave Caela a cold, stern look. "We'll have none of that spellcasting in here, young lady. If you must flaunt your godhood, go outside and do it. I'm sure the Daemons will be most entertained. And turn off that shield of yours. It's a dreadful waste of energy and hardly necessary in here." The Master poked at Caela's shield with one thin finger and it was gone instantly. Caela was shocked. No one should be able to affect her own spells, not even another immortal.

"Now tell me what you want," the Master said, bending down to his book once again, scribbling another notation.

"I ... that is we ... we want to meet a Daemon Spawn."

The Master stopped writing and looked up. "Is that all? Why do you come covered in secrecy then?" He placed two fingers in his mouth and blew out a sharp whistle that quickly rose out of the range of Caela's hearing. Jahpeth was clearly irritated by it, bending his head down and shaking it.

A cloud of smoke and a gout of fire sprouted beside the Master. When it cleared, a six foot Hellbat stood at attention. "Nathan, please guide these two to level five. They want to meet a Daemon Spawn." The Master turned to Jahpeth. "You do know how to fly don't you?"

"Yes," Jahpeth said, his head still ringing from the summoning of the Hellbat.

"Good," the Master nodded. "Nathan will be your guide. But I must warn you, once outside my tiny domain, you may face Hell's full fury. I will have to report your presence here, it's my job you understand. Nothing personal. Gods aren't highly regarded in Hell, what with war so imminent."

"We understand," Caela said.

"Very good, I'm glad there's no hard feelings. Oh, and here's your shield." He reached out his hand and with a flick of his wrist the glowing shield was back in place around both Caela and Jahpeth. "I must tell you, I don't agree with this war thing. We get too many dead souls as it is. It'll just mean so much more paper work for you know who." He tapped himself on his chest. "Ah, war is just Hell, as they say. Oh, that is funny!" he chuckled at his own joke and went back to writing in his book. "Good day."

The Hellbat flew faster than any living thing Jahpeth had ever seen. He was barely able to keep up with it. Through cavern after cavern, over burning sulphurous lakes and exploding mountaintops, down through tunnels bored into solid rock and past millions of screaming souls in eternal torment they flew.

The Hellbat went into a shallow glide and brought them to a barren stretch of beach with black sand beside a sea of molten glass. It pointed silently at an outcropping of rock down the beach and crossed its arms.

"I guess this is as far as he goes," Caela said, wiping the sweat out of her face with a handkerchief taken from inside her tunic.

An unholy screeching filled the air. A huge shadow crossed the beach. As they looked up Caela and Jahpeth saw a flying Lizard, a serpent a hundred feet long, with an appetite to match, sweeping down at them. Caela ducked and Jahpeth ran and jumped aside at the last second, the monster's jaws narrowly missing his flank. The Hellbat stood its ground. In an instant, the monster had the Hellbat in its jaws and gulped it down without chewing once.

Jahpeth and Caela ran toward the outcropping as the Lizard circled overhead and then lazily flew out over the sea, its hunger and curiosity both sated. Just before the outcropping Caela stumbled over something and rolled in the sand. Sitting up dizzily, she looked at what she had tripped over. A round stone. No, a pile of round stones, each the size of a baseball. Except they were oddly egg-shaped. "Eggs!" Caela nearly screamed.

Caela picked up one of the larger eggs. It was heavy, with a thick shell. The egg immediately started to fill with tiny cracks. She dropped it to the sand reflexively. For the first time she noticed there were hundreds and thousands of eggs all around her.

The silence of the beach was shattered by the tiny sounds of thousands of egg shells splitting. Lightning crackled overhead and the sea began to beat heavily on the black shore. Caela reached down and picked up another whole egg and jumped on Jahpeth's back.

"Jahpeth! she yelled, "Take us up! Quickly! I've got a Spawn egg!" She could hear the faint cracking sounds multiplying and getting louder.

Jahpeth launched them into the air and flew out over the glass sea. Caela reached into her tunic to make sure her egg was safe. It cracked. The cracks thickened and small pieces flew away. Caela could feel the larger pieces separating.

The egg cracked open and a snakehead poked out; blinking it's eyes, halfblind from the light. Caela could see that it was not a true snake, but merely a small head on a long neck. The features were those of a newborn Daemon. Sharp teeth glistened as the creature looked up at Caela's face, inches away. It was hungry. But what was she to do? She had no food.

"Behind us! Jahpeth yelled. "That Lizard's back, no doubt drawn by the hatchlings!"

The beast swept down at them from behind. There was not time to dodge its attack. Caela dug her legs into Jahpeth's sides and grasped the medallion with her free hand. "Strength of the hurricane, power of the storm: she chanted: Give me the means to defeat my foe." A long sword and scabbard materialized on Jahpeth's back, hitched to him by a golden harness. Caela drew the sword and with one motion swung it up at their attacker. The Lizard had no chance to avoid the blow, but added his force to it. The sword sliced through his jaw so that it hung open. Bits of flesh spattered Caela as the Lizard screamed and plunged to the ground in pain, where the hatchlings devoured it.

The Spawn that Caela held wriggled in her grasp and squawled. With some disgust, Caela took the Lizard flesh and fed it to the hatchling. The Spawn gobbled it ravenously and then laid down in her lap to sleep.

Caela shrugged off the backpack she wore, placed the Spawn in it and hung the bag over the scabbard.

"We have our Spawn, now let's get out of here!" Caela yelled. Jahpeth flew as swiftly as he could, trusting to memory, and to instinct when memory failed him, to find the way back to First Hell where they had met the Master.

Inside the hut Caela spoke to the Master. "There seems to have been some mistake," she said. "We're not dead and don't belong here at all."

The Master stared at her in disbelief. "Not dead? Are you sure?"

"As sure as I can be."

The Master rubbed his bald head and massaged his neck. "This is quite irregular. No one has entered Hell without richly deserving it for eons. No one has ever left Hell once damned here, for just as long. How am I to straighten this situation out? I'm sure there will be an inquiry and heads will roll, literally." The Master broke out in a nervous sweat.

Caela stepped forward. "If you could tell us how to get back to the living world we would be glad to just leave and forget it ever happened."

"That's very kind of you. There is a way out. This is a powerful icon, fixed with a special spell." The Master took a ring from his left hand and gave it to Caela. "There's just one thing I must ask of you though."

Caela took the ring. "Anything, as long as we get home."

Outside the hut, Caela mounted Jahpeth, the ring hanging on the chain next to her medallion. She reached down and pulled the Master up so that he sat behind her. "Are you all right? she asked Jahpeth.

"Light as a feather. We'll have no problem, if that ring is what he says it is."

The Master was shaking as he put his arms around Caela's middle.

"Don't be afraid. Jahpeth's been flying since he was a young colt. He'll get us out."

"No doubt he will, if he can get past ... them!"

Caela looked where the Master pointed, in the direction they had come from the lower Hells. The 'sky' was blackened with a host of flying things.

"Hellbats!" Jahpeth shouted. "And flying snakes and Lizards!" He began to dance about. Caela found it hard to keep him steady. Finally, she jabbed him in the ribs with her heels and yelled, "Go!"

The Master guided them to a secret doorway made or iron near the top of the arching ceiling. He told Caela to hold the ring up to the door as he chanted an evil spell. The door swung down to open and Jahpeth dodged in with his passengers holding on for dear life.

It was a wide tunnel cut through rock long ages ago. They flew upward, the walls speeding down past them. Caela could hear a thundering cacophony far behind them. As they flew, it seemed to get closer. The evil hosts were gaining on them.

A light shone from above them. Jahpeth neighed and pressed on faster up the tunnel. "There! Ahead! There's the way out. We'll make it!"

They bolted up into the open sky, exiting from the very top of Mount

Caela...

Ramanon. They were back over Asgard and out of Hell.

"We made it!" Caela yelled, exalting in their freedom.

"Yes, but look behind us!" The Master was shaking more than ever. Caela looked back to see the reason for his fear.

The evil hosts were pouring out of Mount Ramanon, into the skies over Asgard. A thick black cloud hung over the mountain, making it look like an active volcano.

"Quick, Jahpeth!" Caela said. "Fly as high and as fast as you can, lead them away from the main city! Their defenses may not be ready for this."

Jahpeth shot upward into the sky, heading straight for the noon sun. The evil hosts were once again below them and steadily drawing closer. The heat of the sun was becoming unbearable. "Oh. Icarus," Caela said in despair, "is this where your wax wings began to melt and you feel to earth?"

The idea came to her so suddenly it nearly knocked Caela from Jahpeth's back. The game. She leaned over Jahpeth's left ear. "Jahpeth. Will you play our game with me one more time? We may never play it again."

Jahpeth was straining and sweating from the exertion of flying and carrying two passengers. Panting, he answered, "Surely, you are the craziest half-mortal I have ever met. We are about to be ripped to pieces and you want to play a game."

Caela leaned forward and whispered in his ear again. "Yes, but if we play the game right ..."

The evil host were almost within a dozen strides of his flanks when Jahpeth broke into a headlong dive to the ground. Surprised, the Hellbats and others of the hosts went so high that many of them signed their wings on the sun and fell helplessly. The others, seeing their prey escaping, turned and dove after them.

"You say the words, Caela. I'm not going to even look at the ground." Jahpeth closed his eyes and galloped at the fast-approaching mountainside. The ground rose at a horrifying rate, individual provinces and then cities leaping up at them.

"Almost. Almost." Caela could see the buildings of Senera off to her right. People ran about, terrified by the spectacle of the evil hosts in their skies. The Senera militia was forming up on the edge of town, a hundred demi-god warriors, but no match for this great host alone.

"Now!" Caela screamed out. Jahpeth strained and pulled them into a steep climb, his hooves clawing air just above the craggy mountainside. In a flash, they were high above Asgard again, the evil hosts flying down past them so fast they were a howling blur.

The Hellbats were the first to hit the mountain, since they were the fastest creatures and in the lead. Then came the flying snakes and Lizards. In a heartbeat, half the host was smashed to death while the others tried to pull out of the dive. A second later it was over. Almost the entire host smashed themselves into oblivion on the side of Mount Ramanon. The Senera militia would be well able to handle the rest.

Jahpeth brought them to a safe landing on the outskirts of Senera. He was exhausted. Caela dismounted, helped the Master down and removed the scabbard and backpack from Jahpeth's back. She hugged Jahpeth tightly around the neck. "Well done, my friend. Very well done." Caela turned to her other companion, the Master, who had slumped to the ground and was now dusting himself off. "What of you, Master? How will you live in Asgard?"

The Master shrugged and for the first time Caela saw him smile. "I will manage. I know something about keeping books." He bowed to Caela as he left them. "Goodbye, and thank you again." He turned and strode off toward whatever fate awaited him in Senera.

Jaro was in a foul mood when Caela and Jahpeth entered the throne room. Messengers came and went in a furious scurry of activity. Lightning bolts flashed out of dark clouds over his head, scorching more than one messenger bearing bad news and leaving the smell of ozone in the air. "Caela!" his voice boomed. "Why are you back without finishing your mission? The least you could do is help us defend against this sudden attack."

Caela took the newborn Spawn out of the backpack and held it up for Jaro to see. It hissed at him, showing its tiny, needle-like teeth.

The clouds over Jaro began to lighten and fade away. Even the messengers stopped and stared at the small, infant creature from Hell.

Caela held the Spawn to her breast. "I think you are frightening it, with all that thunder and lightning." The creature laid its head on her shoulder and half-closed its eyes as Caela petted it.

Jaro left his throne and slowly approached Caela, his bare feet padding on the stone floor. In a whisper, he asked, "May I hold it, for a second?"

Caela nodded and gently lifted the creature off her shoulder and into Jaro's hands. This time it didn't hiss, it was half asleep. It drowsed on Jaro's shoulder. He stroked its back gently. He spoke in a whisper, so as not to awaken the creature. "This is what I sent you to Hell for, my dear Caela. To seek out the nature of evil. You have done well. You have proven that a thing is not evil unto itself, but learns evil, or love. Well done, I am proud. Perhaps Asgard will some day yet vanquish evil from all realms."

Jaro returned to his throne and sat with the creature asleep on his lap, watching its slow breathing, content. A shining light shone over him, warming the room. He dismissed Caela and Jahpeth with a slow wave of his hand and they left the room.

Jahpeth and Caela stood inside the washroom of the building where Caela worked. The door was still locked and someone was banging on it. "Just a minute!" she yelled.

"Caela! Caela!" a muffled voice shouted. It was Terrence. "I've got great news, you won't believe it." He sounded out of breath. "We got two new accounts today and some of the old ones are coming back. Stu just called, it seems his wife will be out of the hospital in a few days."

Caela, dressed once again in her business suit, moved to unlock the door. Jahpeth cleared his throat as she passed him.

"Do you think it's wise to open that door without a little preparation?" he said, in an amused tone of voice.

Caela covered her mouth with her hands. "Oh, my God! I forgot, I'm sorry Jahpeth."

She held the medallion up over Jahpeth's muzzle and whispered a short prayer. A moment later, Jahpeth still stood there, but on two feet instead of four, and wearing a pinstripe business suit.

"That's better," he said, checking his thick, silky black hair in the washroom mirror. "I believe a man in the ladies washroom will be easier to explain than a horse, even if he is quite a handsome horse."

Caela unlocked the door and she and Jahpeth walked out of the washroom, arm in arm, past Terrence's open-mouthed astonishment.

John S. Manor

LETTERS

"MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO..."
Cherise Morris
Oakland, California
Dear Jan:

I have a suggestion for you for the magazine. Could you please print "Make checks payable to: ..." on the subscription form. (That's why my envelope is torn open and resealed as it is!)

I can realistically wait for your next issue, but I don't want to! Thank you for the magazine of my dreams!

Will do. –MZB

Dear Cherise,

Thank you for the tip. It's hard to imagine, but these things are a little easier said, than done. On the "Subscribe Now..." page I probably could paste up a line right below City, or right after the cost line, but it's tricky to add it in and get it perfectly straight. How about if I add it next time I redesign the ads? Until then, please, rest assured that we have a very friendly banker, and no matter what combination of Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine you chose to use, they will accept it. And if all else fails feel free to make it out to me! – jlb

"INTERACTIVE MAGAZINE..."
Mary Anne Landers
Russellville, Arkansas
Dear Jan:

About my review of the last issue of your magazine, as I mentioned to you I submitted it to the fanzine *FOSFAX*. I anticipate that it'll be published in the March issue; it may have already been published and mailed out, but I haven't received my copy yet. All rights to material in *FOSFAX* revert to the contributor upon publication, so it's okay by me if you want to run my review or any portion thereof in *MZBs FANTASY MAGAZINE*.

Y'know, despite my gripes, I must say I've never come upon a major sf/f magazine editorial staff that interacts as much as you and Bradley do with your readers and writers—and, I guess I should add, your critics. I'm grateful for the attention, and I can always use the feedback—whether negative or positive. I'm looking forward to the next issue.

Thanks: that's one of the reasons we wanted this to be an "interactive" magazine. –MZB

Dear Mary Anne - Rima,

Oh, I like that part about being a "major" sf/f magazine!! Gee with your comment and Mary Aldridge's story the "Adrinka Cloth" up for the Nebula Award, I'm beginning to feel that this little project has some potential. Now, if we could only get the word out and start really selling! Thanks for your letter.– jlb

PUBLICITY TOUR???
Hollie Williams
Lafayette, Louisiana
Dear Ms. Bradley:

I have just finished reading my first issue of your FANTASTIC!! magazine. Needless to say, I love it! Enclosed is my ballot for that issue. I truly wish I could suggest a bookstore here in town that might be interested in selling your magazine, but this city is severely limited in its bookstores. The only ones which handle fiction are B. Dalton and Waldenbooks and these are national chains. If anyone else opens up I'll be sure and suggest they request *Fantasy Magazine*.

Well, I just had to write and let you know how much I love the magazine. You can be sure I'll continue to submit stories until you like one enough that you'd like to buy! You'll hear from me again soon.

My foster-daughter Kat and I drove thru Louisiana 2 years ago. We didn't hit Lafayette because we never heard of it. Next time I'll make a point of stopping. Anyone else out there want a publicity tour? –MZB

NOT AGAIN!
Ellen Yamamoto
Berkeley, California
Dear Fantasy Magazine:

May I make a slight suggestion? Please don't put your printed subscription blank on the front of a story that is on the back of the form. Some people like to keep their magazines intact. Thanks! I sound so pompous—I didn't mean to—please forgive (how fragile the written word). Again thank you

P.S. I hope that MZB is in good health.

Just can't stand little cards drifting out—so Xerox it, or just write to us. –MZB

Dear Ellen,

I know, every time I'm laying out the magazine and after all the changes have to be made to accomodate the art and the final line-up of the stories, I cringe. I hear my ten year old daughter's voice saying "Mom, I told you 5 issues ago that anybody knows better than to put a subscription form on the back side of a story!" But when I do the lay-out I put the highest priority to the art and the stories. Marion and I agreed at the very beginning that one thing we did not like in a magazines was to have to flip from page16 to page 32 to page 54, etc. when reading a story. Often times when I have to do that I lose interest. But Ellen now at least you can count on having a subscription form on the back of the Cauldron vote sheet, and hopefully you will take a moment to rank the stories. Your feedback is very helpful. And we have added a **free** *business reply card as an insert for your convience. If you don't need it, please pass it on to a friend! Thankx – jlb*

P.S. Marion is doing **great** *!!! It's wonderful to see. She is so conscientious about her diet and exercises, and she's walking up to five miles a day— when I went to get her at the hospital in Paoli, Penn. over Thanksgiving weekend, she couldn't walk 50 feet with a cane.*

After being around Marion, I can better understand what Parke Godwin is talking about in his Guest Editorial this issue - drive and determination - if they could just bottle it! –jlb

continued on page 54 ~

JAMES BALKOVEK

Silver Eyes

by Laura D. Todd

"Guess what, Mom!" Diana stormed into the kitchen. "The critters knocked over our trash cans!"

Andrea turned from a pan of frying eggs to face her daughter. "What critters?"

"The ones that hang around the yard." Diana dumped herbackpack on the table. "I saw 'em yesterday on the way to school, and a couple of other mornings too. They look like they're waiting for something."

Sure. Like a gourmet dinner. Andrea sighed, picturing the trash-strewn yard she'd have to clean up. "Must be raccoons."

"It's probably the Taylors' dog," said Mort as he walked in knotting his tie. "I'm going to call Mike Taylor and give him hell."

"They're not dogs, Dad" Diana said, and began shoveling Cheerios into her mouth. "You tell them, Ben. You saw them too."

Ben shrugged as if to say, *little sisters*. "I didn't get much of a look, really. Maybe it *was* dogs."

"No it wasn't. They didn't have any tails, and they're bigger than raccoons." Diana's eyes grew wide. "They were big as a kid, and they even stood up like they were almost human."

Andrea's fingers tightened around her coffee cup.

"And they had the weirdest eyes," Diana went on, nearly whispering. "Big, and kid of silvery, like puddles in the sun."

Andrea nearly choked on her coffee. "Wh ...what?"

Ben rolled his eyes. "Did they have green skin and little antennas too?" He stuck a wiggling finger up from each ear.

"Oh, shut up," Diana said.

Mort cleared his throat. "Never mind. Whatever they are, I'm going to call the Animal

Control Center and have them take the little nuisances away."

Andrea felt dizzy. Diana's words echoed in her brain: *silver eyes.*

"Better make sure the yard is cleaned up, Andrea," Mort said as he got up and stuffed a handful of printouts into a folder. "Better get the house shipshape too. The Realtor may be bringing some people by today. He says several clients are interested."

Andrea nodded silently. *Yes, boss.*

She waved goodbye to the kids as they ran off to school. Mort gathered his papers, brushed invisible dust off his suit, and Andrea turned away and looked busy so she wouldn't have to say goodbye to him. She listened for the sound of his Audi in the driveway. After she heard him leave, she poured the rest of her coffee in the sink and stared out the window at the meadow and the dark fringe of woods beyond. Tears blurred her eyes.

Yes, clean up this filthy house, she lectured herself sarcastically, *stop your daydreaming and be of some use! The Boss has spoken.*

She thought of her husband in his suit, gray and square-shouldered. Thought he was pretty hot stuff, ever since he'd landed that well-paying consulting position at the Defense Department. "We're on our way now, Andrea," he'd exulted. Yes, they were on their way to the Greater Arlington Area, to those ritzy half-a-million dollar houses, to those endless tangles of highways and Beltways and wall-to-wall concrete. That was the life all right. No woods there, no scraggly tangles of overgrowth where a person could walk and waste time and dream.

Woods! Her daughter's words came back to her. *Silver eyes..* Cobwebs of memory floated at the edges of her brain. No—it couldn't be possible.

She stared across the field with weeds, to the tangle of woods beyond. Once that place had been her second home. The memories reached for her like arms from the green shadows.

As children they'd all played there. But other girls eventually discovered more important pursuits. Only plain, shy Andrea kept going back. She dreamed of being an artist, only her best creations were inside her head.

The others took to calling her a fruitcake, and she guessed they were right, because she found the company of the forest more enjoyable than that of her giggling peers.

After school she'd ditch her books and race across the meadow to hide in the woods' shadows. She sheltered under the gloom of a great pine tree, next to a tiny trickle of stream ... and she listened. She listened until she understood every word the forest said.

With a sudden leap inside, Andrea returned to the present and wondered: if she went back today, would the forest still say the same things?

Angrily, she forced the thoughts away. All that was in the far, ancient past. Today she had work to do: pick up garbage, tidy up, iron Mort's shirts and get his Power Suits ready so he could impress those folks at Defense. *And they say Lincoln freed the slaves!*

She cut that thought off too. *Forget the self-pity. At least your husband makes a good living. Others have it a lot worse!*

For the rest of the day Andrea cleaned and shopped, washed and ironed, and tried not to feel those green spaces and hear those forest whispers inside her. If she ignored them, they'd surely go away.

At dinner, Mort regaled her with the details of the new system he was designing and how impressed his new boss was with him. Andrea nodded dutifully, letting the words roll over her and lull her back into safe, dull normality.

After dinner, when she put out the trash, she saw them: a line of dim shapes, about child-high, beyond the perimeter of the porch light. As she stared in disbelief, they held out their hands to her and began to keen.

She dropped the garbage, clapped her hands over her ears and ran into the house. But their cries followed her like sighing, lonely winds.

"What's the matter?" Mort said, barely looking up from his printouts.

"I ... I don't feel so well today. I think I'll go to bed early."

"Mmm. 'Night."

She fled upstairs and shut herself in the bedroom with a thick book. When her eyes started to hurt she curled up in bed and pulled the blanket over her head. There ... the sounds were gone. She was safe.

They came for her in her dreams: small childlike shapes, skin dark and rough as tree bark. Their hair made of leaves and fronds of fern, their huge eyes shining like the streamlets that flowed within the heart of the woods.

They struggled across the meadow and down the hard, barren concrete streets that bruised their feet, until they came to her yard. There they stood crying. "Come to us!" Their voices were like the song of trickling water over stones. But the melody was one of loss and desolation.

Andrea suddenly awakened and found herself standing at the front doorway in her nightgown and bare feet. And there *they* stood, like a row of beggar children, outlined by the moonlight.

It wasn't a dream. Their cries were real. "Come...come ..."

"No!" She fled back into the house, slammed the door and fumbled at the lock.

The next day Andrea did everything to try and blot out the keening cries which echoed in her ears. She vacuumed every rug in the house. She scrubbed the bathroom tiles. She went to the Shop 'N Save and roamed the aisles for hours before she came out with a bag of chips and some chocolate ice cream. Sometimes a good munch session helped chase away the blues.

The day after that she paid a visit to Charlotte, a woman she used to work with. Charlotte used to like to cry on Andrea's shoulder about the cruelties of men, the injustices of work, the unfairness of the world.

Charlotte, who had put on some weight, was delighted to see Andrea. She started in right where she'd left off years ago. Her husband took her for granted and her kids had a bad attitude. They ended up at Friendly's over coffee ice cream just like old times.

"Mort's gonna kidnap me and throw away the key," Andrea said, trying to make it sound like a joke. As for the small figures who waited for her, reaching out and crying ...well, Charlotte wouldn't understand that sort of thing. Andrea soon said goodbye, feeling no better.

That evening Mort showed her

Silver Eyes

some real estate books from Arlington, where all the "important" people lived and money flowed like water. "It's where everything's happening. The people I'll meet— ." He broke off. "You don't seem very excited about all this Andrea."

"Uh ... sorry, Mort." She tried to smile. "Guess I just don't look forward to packing." *What the hell was wrong with her,* she wondered. She ought to be looking forward to moving somewhere where there'd be more opportunity for her. Maybe she could go back to school, get a real job. Wasn't that what every woman was supposed to want—a career, a chance to fulfill herself? Grimacing, she pulled a loose thread off the sofa and wound it around her finger.

In bed that night, Mort reached for her. She wasn't in the mood, but she didn't have the energy to put him off. He was silent and remote, as usual. *Probably thinking about one of his projects.* Still, Andrea clung to him and tried to make the warmth of his body drive away thoughts of the figures outside. Were they there tonight? Was that them out there crying now, or just her imagination?

Afterward Andrea drifted asleep, and memories rose like dark water to drown her.

She was sixteen, a misfit with windblown hair and a dirty sweatshirt. She would sit under the trees for hours and listen to the leaves as they whispered to her: *you don't belong in the concrete world. You belong here –with us.*

I hear you, the girl answered the forest's invisible spirit. *I'm one with you, always.*

Yet a part of Andrea was human, and she longed for companions she could see and touch and speak with. She yearned to see the forest spirit made into flesh, and so she created soul-companions out of dreams; shaped them from leaves and bark and earth and water. She painted them in her mind canvas, stroke by loving stroke. *Come into being,* she told them. *Shelter under the pines, dance among the branches, flow with the streams.* Their forms became clearer as she spoke. They crouched before her, shy as young deer ready to bolt, yet reverent before their creator.

She reached out a gentle hand to her people. Their eyes shone like still ponds, reflecting the sky in their silver depths. *Don't be shy, children, don't fear me. I'll be your mother ... I'll take care of you, and someday I'll come here and be one with you.*

She leaned to kiss them and give them life: her people, the Silver Eyes.

She'd never see them again. Two days later, her dad had been killed in a hit-and-run accident. After the funeral a neighbor who worked at Dataforms got her a job so she could help her mother pay the bills, and there she'd met Mort, an ambitious young programmer. He was her first boyfriend, and she wasn't thinking straight, and one thing had led to another, and ... well, with a family in financial trouble, getting married seemed the best thing to do anyway.

As for the young woods-wanderer ... best to bury that person and forget. Forget all she'd thought and done and dreamed. After all, people had to grow up and live in the Real World.

And now here she was, in this handsome middle-class tomb of a house ... this comfortable prison of a life. And the Silver Eyes had stayed safely buried—until now.

Andrea found herself sitting up in bed, staring into the dark. God, it was stifling in here tonight! She threw off the blanket and staggered out of bed. An anguished wailing filled her ears. Her brain was so fuzzy she barely knew where she was going. Somehow she made her way through the house, tripping over furniture and stumbling into walls, and found herself at the front door. Her numb fingers struggled with the lock and then she flung the door open wide.

There they stood: her people, the Silver Eyes.

They raised a cry that turned her inside out. "Mother ... mother." They began to keen in an unhuman rhythm like wind rising and dying. One would begin then fade out and the cry would be taken up by another.

"So long ... we waited ..."

"for you, Mother. Our hearts ..."

"Our hearts grew dark ..."

"without you. See how we ..."

"See how we suffer!" One of them cried as it raised arms thin as branches.

Andrea struggled to speak. "Go away! You're not real!" She tried to shut the door, but her hand didn't obey her.

One, bolder than the others, took a step forward. "But we are. *You* made us live. Why did you give us life, Mother, and then leave us?"

Tears welled in her eyes. Their voices flowed over her and wove her, helpless, into their tapestry.

"We live what you live ... feel what you feel. We dreamed ..."

"Yes, dreamed," the smallest, cried out,"dreamed we saw you taken away to the middle of the Concrete Lands, and ..."

"We heard your soul cry," they chorused.

Tears flowed down Andrea's cheeks.

"And so we dared to cross the Treeless Waste," said one who swayed with willowy grace. "We traveled beyond the edge of the world ... in search of you."

"Save us, Mother, save us, and we will save you."

They surged toward her in a movement like flowing grass. Andrea's hand clenched the doorknob. *Shut the door!* But she couldn't make her hand move. Calling up the images of her children's faces: Ben, Diana. She called out *They're real. They need me!*

Too late. Her hesitation doomed her. Her first children swarmed about her now, their soft hands caressing her. She knew they had her.

She fought for breath, a great obstruction her throat. "Children ... don't cry anymore. I'm coming!"

She stumbled outside. The cold air swirled around her body; stones cut into her bare feet but she barely noticed as she crouched to embrace them.

"Mother! Oh, Mother." They surrounded her with welcoming caresses and murmurs of joy; twined fingers in her hair and her thin nightgown. Their fragrance filled her nose: the smell of damp earth and pine needles. "We missed you so." Their touch was rough and solid like tree branches.

"Me too. I'll never leave you again." As she said the words, she knew them for the truth. These creatures had become as real as she. And no one, not even her own children, needed her and loved her as these little ones did.

"Let's go home," she said, and let them bear her away across the meadow and into the forest, away from the concrete world forever.

❧ *Laura Todd*

Power of the Peaks

by Gregory Remington

Is there no other way?" said Adair the Silver.

"None," said his mother.

"But there must be!" His footsteps slapped back and forth along the floorstones of his secret study. "I had hoped ..."

"I know what you had hoped. But Tyran and his army camp this very night at our border. For such as you and I, there is no other way in the time remaining."

At twenty-three years, Adair the Silver was very young to be royal wizard of any realm. But Eltruvia was a small princedom, half of it mountains; its prince was his distant cousin; and his mother, Adrana the Bronze, was close at hand to advise him.

"Very well," he said at last with a heavy sigh. "But who ..."

"The choice is obvious. Perandra Dimplecheek."

His hand jerked, shapping his ebony wand in half. "No!"

"Who else? The Power of the Peaks is fueled by hatred, and no hatred burns hotter than love forced inside out." Adrana the Bronze stood, took the two pieces of wand from his hands, held them together, and closed her eyes. After a brief shower of violet sparks, the wand was whole again.

"But we are to be married!"

"If King Tyran is successful, you and the Dimplecheeked, like mates and lovers, parents and children throughout Eltruvia, will doubtless lose each other to death. Your choice is to sacrifice her tonight, or flee with her like a pair of cowards from your cousin's princedom. Will Prince Jereld flee? Will I?"

The young wizard sat on his throne of black marble. "May I at least tell her why?"

"No, you may not." Adrana's tone brooked no argument, yet she added an explanation. "To understand may be to forgive, and you cannot risk her forgiveness. It would conquer her hate, and all would be for nothing. As well kill her as explain to her, and only fools kill their sacrifices, which is to draw from them only the one brief and fading burst of hate-power."

He reached for the wine. She brought the butt of his wand down sharply on the inlaid table, and the flagon jumped to the ceiling and hung there, suspended in air, well out of his reach. He took the goblet in his hands anyway and sat staring into it, trying to make it fill of itself. Without success. To make wine out of air required a level of power attained by very few wizards before their fiftieth year. Not even his mother was fifty years old yet.

"There is no other way," she repeated. "Not for such as you and I, not in the time remaining. If there were another way, would I keep it secret from you, my son? If you had been a better student of the magic arts, there might have been another way, but now there is not."

"Let us trust to Eltruvia's natural strength! By the Mountains, Mother, Jereld tried to win her himself! Would he want to buy safety at such a price?"

"Possibly not. Therefore he must not know any more than the Dimplecheeked may know. But need I remind you that Tyran of Mondravia is his own wizard, and almost beyond compare both as wizard and conquering king? Could Jereld's army hope to stand against even his mortal troops? Let alone his troops when augmented with the dragons and giants he grows in an instant from his enchanted pebbles! Need I remind you how the realms of Doravia, Eastmarnia, and Valkolai groaned beneath those forces?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" He brought the goblet down with such a force that it bent it out of shape and shattered several of the table's tiles. After staring for a few moments at the damage, he cast the goblet against the wall, buried his head in his arms on the ruined inlay, said, "Arrange for it, then," and began to sob.

"An end to your snuffling," Adrana said sternly. "I shall tell Perandra that you beg a lonely tryst with her in the Stone Forest near the top of Lacewater Falls tonight at moonrise. Prepare the place, prepare yourself, and, for the sake of mountain magic enough to defeat mighty Tyran in his own kind of battle, let the girl neither see your tears nor suspect them. She must believe beyond any doubt that she misread you all these years, that you are a man who enjoys doing such things for their own sake."

So he did them to his love that night, many of them, there in the menhir-strewn glade near the waterfall. Even though he would rather someone else had done them to him. Even though he could not have done them with his hands, could only do them by directing things at a distance, as far from her as the glad and the moonlight

would allow.

He was awestruck that it took so much to turn her love to hate. A part of him exalted, but the rest of him screamed silently, "Hate me! Hate me, and let me have done with this!" until he might have come close to hating her.

When, as last, her emotion turned inside out, he knew by the surge of power that was like molten lava in his veins. Before, his magic had been just sufficient to make ropes twist and tongs snap themselves at a distance of ten paces. Now he found that he could easily make any of the ancient stone pillars rise and move through the air.

He considered floating one over and causing it to fall upon himself. But Perandra must be brought back safely to Jereld's castle.

Her emotion had turned just in time, just before she fainted. Capping the volcano of wizardly power, he lifted her in his mortal arms. And felt the sharp force of his success. Even unconscious, her being screamed with hate for him, though her body could not revolt against his touch. Not until she woke a little, when they were halfway down, and then she lacked strength to twist out of his arms, and soon lost consciousness again.

He laid her in her bed and bent to dress her wounds, but Adrana the Bronze appeared in the doorway. "Let be," she ordered him. "We cannot risk her waking to catch your tenderness. Nor can we risk letting it be known that you cared enough to summon an attendant. I shall put it in the mind of some servant to check on her presently."

"As you say." He turned and made for the door.

She caught his arm. "Where are you going, Son?"

"Back into the mountains, Mother. To make one of them fall on me."

"And waste the girl's pain? And waste the Power of the Peaks?"

Twisting away from her grip, he met her eyes with a glower. "As you say ... Adrana," he repeated. "I will let it wait until after Tyran is crushed. But never touch me again.!"

He was swaying from wine and lack of sleep when Prince Jereld came to his tower room at dawn and said: "You are banished."

Setting down his cup, Adair leaned both hands on the table, made sure with his leg of the placement of the chair behind him, and sat heavily. "Why?"

"Because I will not have such things done in my realm as you did last night."

The wizard smiled wryly. "No doubt there are worse things happening today at our borders, where Tyran is forcing his way in. Ask your fastest messengers. Ask Adrana the Bronze."

"Because our enemy does such things, should we do them, too? In the Name of the Mountains, man!"

Adair felt the volcano about to erupt again. Seeking to stopper it, he poured himself more wine.

His cousin's hatred, too, seeing that Jereld no longer called him "cousin." Better and better. His power should easily match all of Tyran's dragons and all of his giants now. "How is she?" he asked.

"How ... is ... By the Mountains, you should be ashamed to ask!"

"I have some right to wonder. We were to marry."

"I marry her now! If she will have me. And let me help you forget her. Now go!"

"Today?" The wizard raised his cup and swallowed half its contents. "Cousin Jereld, I am drunk."

"Drunk or sober, pack-laden or beggared, armed or weaponless! You are to be gone within the hour."

"A wizard is never weaponless." Adair drank again. "And what is your battle plan without me? What is your defense?"

"Here I am and here I wait."

"Snug in your royal castle, and let Tyran's troops ravage the rest of your princedom?"

Jereld folded his arms. "There are not troops enough in all Eltruvia to meet the wizard-king anywhere but in the pass below this castle."

Adair filled his cup once more, then fumbled the cork back into position and punched it home in the bottle's neck. "So Tyran blocks your pass and starves your dead or worse than dead. I thank you for sending me away!" He stood slowly, holding the edge of the table with one hand and his cup with the other. Lifting the latter, he drank once more, leaving dregs in the bottom fo the cup to slosh over its sides when he set it down, hard. "Best marry her quickly, cousin. Wait for her wounds to heal, and you'll both be dead or otherwise defeated. Along with all your realm."

"Go! I give you nothing but the robes you wear and the wine in your belly!"

"You depend much upon the famous loyalty of Eltruvian wizards to their royal princes. Here I sit until our enemy comes into the pass."

"Here we sit without you. You defile us. Go!"

Adair raised his head and looked straight into Jereld's eyes. "You will let me gather what I choose of my own things. While you gather your troops. You will then escort me as far as –until we meet King Tyran and his army. Is that understood?"

For a moment, Jereld tried to match his cousin's gaze. Perhaps he sensed the volcano at last, grumbling away even at the age-old obedience of Eltruvian wizards to their royal kind. With one last frown, the prince turned away. "It is understood," he mumbled. "But be quick. We ride at midmorning."

Adair drank more wine and left the packing to Adrana the Bronze. What more, after all, did a wizard really need who carried the Power of the Peaks bottle dup inside? Still drunk, he rode that day in a litter, only vaguely aware of Adrana riding a white mule alongside. He had wanted her to stay in the castle. As the realm's only other wizard, her guardianship would have been better than nothing for Perandra ... for the other people left behind when the army came out with Prince Jereld.

Or it might have been worse than nothing. He drank more wine and dozed.

Next day there was no more wine, he suspected through his mother's plotting. Forced into sobriety, he rode the white mule while Adrana claimed the litter.

They passed many small bands of refugees hurrying incountry to the mountain fastnesses. Some told of seeing Tyran's depredations with their own eyes. Some had the wounds of a narrow escape.

In the afternoon, Prince Jereld's army met King Tyran's.

The wizard-king's human regiment stretched almost from the eastern horizon to the western, so that the giants and dragons on its flanks looked little more than fierce and formidable toys at either end.

King Tyran, on a huge roan charger, rode forth from the center until he was within speaking distance of Prince Jereld.

"Invader," said the prince, "leave my land."

The wizard-king laughed. "Little youth, my Mondravian soldiers will

break your pitiful army's spine and leave it cringing for the unnatural lusts of my new auxiliaries, the surviving scum of Doravia, Eastmarnia, and Valkolai, while my giants and dragons ring you round to feed on whoever of you tried to retreat." Holding up a box of shiny metal, he went on, "So far in your silly little land I have wanted only a dozen dragons and giants, but in this box are a hundred more of each. Strike me down, or strike the box out of my hand, and they spring up ready to chomp my enemies. Fight fairly, and I may decide to watch the battle awhile before I release them."

Adair dismounted, so as to have both feet on the ground. It had all been for this.

"Contain yourself!" Jereld ordered in an undertone. "So far, he has given us nothing but words."

"You'd wait till he gives us death?"

"Honor demands it," said the prince, calmly overlooking the testimony of messengers and refugee bands from his realm's outer edge.

Tyran could not have heard their words but, seeing that they had made some consultation and ended by doing nothing, he laughed again, turned to face his troops, raised his free hand, and chopped it down through the air. At the signal, his army raised a shout and began its rush across the open plain.

Prince Jereld shouted commands to his own troops, but they seemed more terrified than disciplined. Ignoring the confusion behind him, Adair the Silver thrust forth his arms and let the volcano erupt at last.

With a roar and a rumbling like that of a thousand thunders, a great chasm cut open the length of the plain between the two armies. Tyran's forces ground to a halt, Jereld's began regaining a little of their discipline.

Tyran was caught on the same side as his enemies, but nearer the gulf. As Adair widened it, the back hooves of the wizard-king's charger slipped and skidded on the edge. Tyran leaped free just as the horse toppled backward. Its whinny echoed long, ever deeper and fainter from the abyss.

For the third time, the wizard-king laughed. "So, my bold stripling!" said he, turning to Adair, "Doravia, Eastmarnia, and Valkolai are lowland realms, where I found no wizards worthy of the name. For I, too, have the Magic of the Mountains, of my own mountains of Moldravia and it grows in me with every land I overrun."

Adair directed a cloud of fiery heat at him. Tyran met it with a cloud of fierce blue. For what seemed a long time, the two clouds strained against each other, twisting, writhing, snaking out tendrils and snapping them off before they could reach far.

"You had fed it well," Tyran said at last, with the smallest of grunts. "Someday you might have become a wizard to reckon with. But what can your little homegrown power be as yet to mine, which is fed by the hatred of three conquered realms?"

With that, he uttered a loud cry, and the sides of the chasm rushed together again behind him. With another cry, he flipped open his box, cast his enchanted pebbles about broadside, and a hundred ogres and a hundred dragons sprang into being. Then he gave a third cry, and his army resumed its charge across the resealed plain.

Through all of this, Adair the Silver could do nothing save continue to hold Tyran's blue cloud from his person, and even his grip on that was slipping. Tentacles of searing cold were reaching through his own red heat, to touch his throat, his chest, his forehead ...

All for nothing! he thought bitterly. Nothing but this! Adrana, see what you have done!

As Adair began to fall, a new cry shattered the air behind him, a scream of loud and savage triumph. From nowhere, as it seemed—from nowhere but the air above—came a rain of boulders thundering down upon the dragons, giants, Tyran's nearest soldiers, crushing them all into the earth. Suddenly, a ragged mass of granite four times the size of a horse crushed the wizard-king himself. His power snuffed out, and Adair's, with nothing left to oppose it, dissipated over the plain on the tails of the surviving enemies, who were fleeing pellmell.

Adair the Silver turned with Prince Jereld and the rest of their army, to look at Adrana the Bronze, who had descended from her litter to take her stand on solid ground. Slowly she lowered her arms, regarded King Tyran's mangled remains, and said, as if he could still hear:

"And what is the hatred of three conquered realms for their invader compared with the love turned to hate of a wizard for his mother?"

As the last of the wizard-king's defeated army disappeared over the horizon, the boulders dissolved back into the nowhere from which they had fallen, leaving only crushed corpses to be ploughed into the soil.

❧ *Gregory Remington*

BACK ISSUES !!!

Issue #1 (Summer 1988) includes:
Imagination and Reason– Poul Anderson
The Skycastle– Bruce D. Arthurs
Moonrise– Dorothy J. Heydt
The Vision– Rachel Cosgrove Payes
Final Exam– Jennifer Roberson
Cover art : George Barr

Issue #2 (Fall 1988) includes:
Dreamtime in Adjaphon–
John Gregory Betancourt
The Hitchhiker– Jayge Carr
Paradox Lost– Dorothy J. Heydt
Was Startling Stories the First Interactive Magazine?– Richard A. Lupoff
Bone Serai– Susan Schwartz
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Issue #3 (Winter 1989) – SOLD OUT

Issue #4 (Spring 1989) includes:
Talishada's Familiar– George Barr as artist *and* author
Under the Skin– Deborah Wheeler
House of Wizards– Laurell K. Hamilton

Issue #5 (Summer 1989) includes:
The Dragon, the Unicorn and the Teddy Bear– Phyllis Ann Karr
Do Virgins Taste Better?–
Deborah Millitello
Dragon Three Two Niner-
Peter L. Manly
Cover art: George Barr

Issue #6 (Fall 1989) includes:
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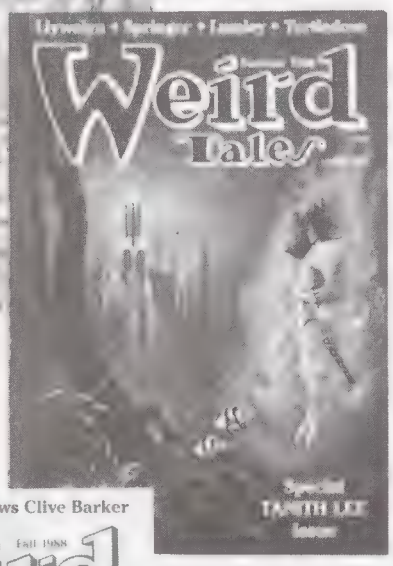

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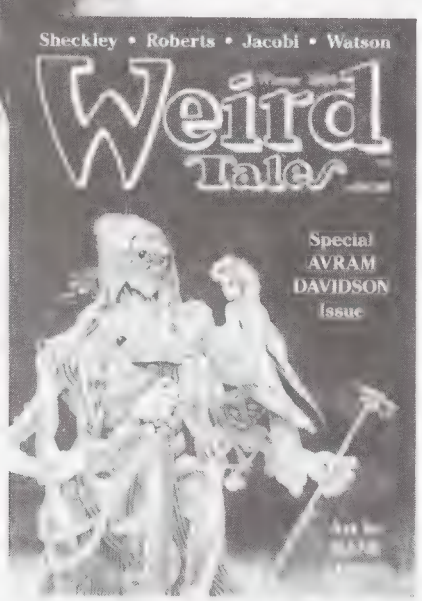

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Marion Zimmer Bradley TALKS TO WRITERS

The major question with which we will deal today is the one that inevitably comes to my mind when I am reading every day's haul of manuscripts; "How do you tell the difference between science fiction, fantasy and horror?"

Judging by the manuscripts that come across my desk, most of you don't. Nine tenths of the really competently written stuff I get falls into the categories of science fiction, or of horror; and by my admittedly narrow definitions, these are not fantasy.

Of course, if one is really all-inclusive in these definitions, all fiction is fantasy ... in the sense that it is the product of somebody's imagination. A story which remains claustrophobically in the here and now, the adventures of Horatio Hornblower or a very imaginary Captain Bligh, a story of football or of adultery in the suburbs ... these are all fantasy; by a very strict standard, everything but a manual of mathematics or perhaps a cook book is fantasy. Certainly all fiction is fantasy; I am old enough to remember (just) when a lot of ills, especially woman's ills, were blamed on novel reading. Very religious people indicted mercilessly all dime novels because they "weren't *true* books" and tended to vitiate or lessen respect for the truth. (Pity they never got around to newspapers.)

The Major Question...

There are still a few people, especially in the Bible Belt, so-called, who feel a real fear of the imaginations of the young. They have sought to ban such pastimes as the assortment of games (whether board or computer) under the generic style of "Dungeons and Dragons", typically an adventure in a far-out and imaginary landscape. Through the overuse of the imagination, they feel, young people are corrupted and turn their attention from the great truths of religions.

Personally, I come down heavy on the other side. I have a very strong conviction that the only thing, if there is one, which distinguishes man from the brute creation, is his imagination.

But on the other hand, about nine-tenths of the literate well-written stuff I get in the mail is either science fiction or horror.

I hate to think that the writers of these stories are simply ignoring my guidelines and deliberately sending me stuff I can't use in the hopes that I'd give up my love for fantasy and print science fiction or horror instead. But it is either this or conclude that they really can't tell the difference. (Maybe they haven't read the guidelines; but of course that couldn't apply to my beloved—and literate—readers.) So I urge all of you to read on and find out what separates science fiction, fantasy and horror; and send me what I really want. Because I will print what one advocate of the stuff calls "sci-fi" if it isn't too hard, I will even print horror, if it isn't too gross; but I prefer fantasy, and I never—no, never—get enough of it in the big slush pile of my every day's mail.

And yet, people still keep sending me horror and "hard" science fiction. (A story of space ships is almost entirely science fiction; a story of vampires or ghouls is horror .... that's the very basic bottom line.) Yet I keep getting spaceship stories. The senders are wasting their postage. I hesitate to imagine that you writers out there think I don't know what I want. I can't at present imagine ever buying any of them; but it's their postage if they want to waste it; it's neither immoral, illegal, nor fattening. (Except insofar as it drives me, in frustration, to the cookie jar.) And I'm still completely determined to send back as many spaceship stories as I get in the mail; even if your story's a potential Nebula winner, I can't use it; save yourself the postage and send it elsewhere.

Don't get me wrong; one of the best books I ever read, and which I used when I was teaching, was an ultimate spaceship story; **Rendezvous with Rama.** And I yield to no man in my admiration for early Heinlein such as **Have Spacesuit, Will Travel.** But I wouldn't print them in MZBs FM. That isn't what we're here for.

Let's get down to definitions and decide what we're talking about. Damon Knight was once quoted as saying he didn't know what good science fiction was "But I know it when I see it, or when I read it."

To start with, what is science fiction? The bottom line is quite simple; it is a story which rests on technology. The spaceship story; the story of an imagined future of the human race. (This is, despite many bummers and dystopias, the most positive story possible; it assumes the human race will *have* a future. It rests on three questions and is or should be, aimed at the young; "Why don't we ...", "What would happen if ..." and "If this goes on ..." which takes the trends of the present day and exaggerates them. I have great admiration for science fiction; but there are plenty of science fiction magazines; and I probably won't print it. No matter how good it is.

Now, horror; I am a little looser on this. I will, I have and I do read and print horror; though I am adamant on one thing and Jan, who has a stomach less strong than mine, joins me; we prefer the old-fashioned kind of horror story which gives the reader a creepy feeling to the one put into words by a best-selling horror writer of the seventies; "If you can't scare 'em, gross 'em out."

I admit I envy this guy's sales figures; I don't envy his books—though I admit a few of them—a very few—are good reading. My roommate won't read 'em though; they give her nightmares. I never get nightmares (except once on a book—true crime—about concentration camps.)

I have written occult fantasy which has been packaged, by TOR BOOKS and others, as horror. That's because in this day and age, occult literature is not popular. I like it and if I can put it across as horror, so much the better.

Somebody once said of modern horror—the true crime

MZB
Talks to Writers...

kind—that it dealt with characters gravely in need of the services of a priest, a policeman and/or a psychiatrist. One of the most voluminous horror writers I can think of specializes in horror fiction which spans categories. Dean Koontz's *Whispers*, one of the most horrible stories I have ever read, could very well have been published as a Crime Novel, since it dealt with a psychopathic murderer who was a victim of child abuse; the same can be said of the best-selling novels of V. C. Andrews.

When I publish horror, it is not overlapping with crime novels. Not that there isn't precedent for that. Robert Bloch began his career and has done well writing and rewriting tales of Jack the Ripper; but while I yield to no one in my admiration for Messrs Koontz, Bloch and King, I still prefer the kind of story which the late H. P. Lovecraft called *'Supernatural Horror in Literature.'*. If you haven't read this classic essay on writing, which can be found in the new version of Lovecraft's complete works, I can't urge you too strongly to hunt it up.

So now you know, I hope, how I define horror and science fiction; it would be easy to say fantasy comprises whatever isn't covered by these. It's not, though; in this very issue we have a story of the same general type as my own Mists of Avalon. It's the historical fantasy *Son of the Sun* by Patricia Shaw Matthews. Of course, when you go back more than about 200 years in history, it's all fantasy anyhow. By which I mean that history, until about 200 years ago, was written for various aims and their purpose was not to record the truth of the past but to inspire and enlighten and uplift; this is why history has mostly been written by the *winners* of various wars who get to define their side as "the truth." Benedict Arnold, a hero in English history, we learned in seventh grade is the great traitor in American History.

Fantasy, too, is a matter of definitions. For instance, I call Jo Clayton's story in this issue really science fiction. But it has a feel of fantasy; it gives me a sense of wonder, so I print it as fantasy. And that's what I really want; the sense of wonder. If I get that—even if I realize afterward—but, but, this is really science fiction or– oh nuts, this is really horror—I'll print it.

But if the spaceship—or the vampire—is too obvious in paragraph one, I won't. I have, after all, all those handy rejection slips.

So let's see more of the freewheeling use of your imagination- your dreams rather than your nightmares.

❧ Marion Zimmer Bradley

Letters, *continued from page 45*

DOT MATRIX PRINTING
David McGinley
Summerdale, Pennsylvania

Dear Subscription Department:

This letter was printed on a dot matrix printer. If Miss Marion is nearby, please ask her if she would mind getting a manuscript done this way. If her answer is 'no', then you might want to tell your writers that they can use double-strike emphasized mode on an Epson printer (or equivalent). I can give you larger margins and triple spacing, too. Thanks for the help!

The only dot matrix I object to is the dim illegible (cheap) all-caps kind. Letter quality dot matrix is OK. –MZB

A NEBULA ???
Mary C. Aldridge
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Dear Ms. Bradley:

George Zebrowski, of the SFWA Bulletin, called me late last week, confirming that "Adinkra Cloth" did indeed make the final Nebula ballot. Right after he called, a friend called to say that she had learned of the nomination via one of the computer networks. Strange, swift world we live in!

I hope that you, and Jan, are as happy as I am about this response to the story. I feel honored to be on the final ballot, and the honor very properly extends to those who published the story.

While I'm talking of honors: I would also like to thank the readers of MZBFM, who chose "The Adinkra Cloth" as their favorite story in the Winter 1989 issue. That made me very happy, too.

Well, we're happy too. –MZB

And good luck Mary - it is a great story and we have our fingers crossed for you.– jlb

CONFUSION...
Mary-Ellen Bradley
Manchester, New Hampshire

Dear Ms. Bradley and Ms. Burke:

Again, you have surpassed yourselves in the last issue of *Fantasy*. Over the last few months I have been extremely busy and haven't had a chance to read the magazine immediately—thereby missing my chance at voting—but when I do get time, and I sit down to read, I am richly rewarded.

I shake my head in confusion at those readers who have penned letters of disappointment in stories, format, presentation. I want to shake them and say, "Look, this is a new publication. Give it a chance, let the bugs get worked out." I wonder if they are expecting Pulitzer Prize material from every page, or that a SF&F Dickens or Shakespeare will blossom forth without the nurturing and fertilizing required beforehand to produce such a classic bloom. Keep doing what you're doing; the encouragement you are giving to new writers is wonderful.

I was glad to hear all was well with you after the earthquake. I am impressed with your notice to donate to your local Red Cross, so much so that I enclose a check for three gift subscriptions to *Fantasy*.

You have to go through an awful lot of fertilizer (to put it politely), but it's worth it. I've always compared it to pearl diving: most of the time, all you get is a wet smelly oyster, not even good to eat; the hundredth time you get a pearl. –MZB

Dear Mary-Ellen,

Thank you for the gift subscriptions. Bobbe Lee, our valued assistant extraordinaire, is tallying up the subscriptions and by next issue we should have forwarded our check to the Red Cross. As

you may know, we continue to have minor shakes and everyone here is getting a little concerned about "the big one". There are now wonderful programs on PBS and the major networks for earthquake preparedness and the more we are aware and prepared the better off we'll be. Thank you for your concern for others.–jlb

MORE HORROR...
Lynne Armstrong-Jones
London, Ontario
Canada

Dear Marion and Jan:

I have a question for you. In replying to my letter to the editor in the latest issue of the 'zine, you mention that there are more markets around for horror than there are for fantasy. Could you please share some names and addresses with me? I've seen some (*Thin Ice, The Scream Factory, Champagne Horror),* but none have been even *close* to the quality of *Weird Tales*. What other semi-pro or pro magazines are there along this line? I've seen quite a few small press publications, but these seem to concentrate on *how* the Big Awful is gonna get the main character, rather than on telling a 'real' story. I hesitate to sign up for some of these strictly on the basis of what's said in an advertisement, as I have to stand in line to get U.S. money orders for each subscription. Could you recommend some reading for me? I've had the impression that a lot of good dark fantasy died with *Twilight Zone*. Thanks again!

I'm not sure when I'll get downtown with the samples for the magazine store: my new job is a *busy* one! But I *will* get there, I promise!

By the way, would you believe my latest sale has been an article on parenting to *Parent to Parent* magazine? Who would've thought that seeing my kid through the terrible two's might had paid off! (A lot of aspects of parenting seem related to fantasy—if not horror!)

Anyway, thanks again. Hopefully there might come a day when we're at the same convention: sure would like to meet you all!

Not being a horror fan in general, I can only recommend you send a stamp to Horror Writers of America; as a writer you'd qualify for membership, and they have all kinds of market lists and guidelines. –MZB

Lynne, why would you want to read that stuff? It's awful. JLB

RIP MY HEART OUT...
Selina Rosen
Chester, ARK

Dear Jan,

The #7 Issue was great. I especially liked "Kill Dance" by Mary Turzillo. With a name like Turzillo, it's gotta be good!

I must say something about Issue #6. The magazine was wonderful, but some poor misguided fool wrote a letter saying;"I loved everything about #6 except Closet Enlightment. What? Was this woman hired by my ex-husband??? Jeez, why doesn't she just rip my heart right out of my chest and stomp on it. Doesn't she know that we writer types are sensitive souls—and that I can arraange for 9 big hairy guys with broad swords to show up on her front porch!

I have been working on a couple of stories and hope to have one for Marion soon.

Dear Selina,

I just can't imagine what Tina was thinking of. But in about 10 years after she gets married and settles down we'll have to ask her to read it agian! One thing though, you might reread what Marion has said about developing rhinoceros skin. I can't remember now which MZB Talks to Writers it was in, but it would be worthwhile looking for it. If it is any consulation, we have the same thing with the magazine. Did you ever see the multiparagraph review Chuq Von Rospach did on the Premier Issue of Fantasy Magazine? He had quite a bit to say, none of it complimentary, unfortunately. But he did have a number of valid points and he has been very helpful and some of his suggestions are what have made each successive issue a little better.

Keep those stories coming. Looking forward to hearing from you—jlb

Read My Story???
Judy Fitzgerald
Huachuca City, AZ

Dear Ms. Bradley,

I sent you 2 stories & redeived the same form rejection both times. My husband sent you a story & received a different "Form" rejection. The turn around time on my 2nd story was so short I doubt you bothered to read it. It is not nice to tell people the secret of selling is to keep sending when little attention is paid to what is sent.

I will not try you again. I prefer an editor I have a chance with.

Dear Judy,

I just saw your postcard to Marion, which disturbed me very much. Marion spends a tremendous amount of effort fostering new writers. You're wrong that she didn't read your stories. The first one from you "Where Have All the Flowers Gone", rec'd 2/15/90 she thought that having the protagonist die"wastes the time you spend building up sympathy." Your second story, "The Twinkie Man" rec'd 4/7/90 as she said did not have enough fantasy content. Your husband's story "Margaret's Sleep", rec'd 2/15/90 as she said, was really occult.

*Marion reads **every** story that is sent to her. She prides herself on fast turnaround. –jlb*

I like a fast turn around because when I was on the other side of the desk, I wasn't writing for fun or literary merit, but to keep beans on the table.–MZB

I must add for you writers out there who have been waiting forever, and sending me requests for status,(with SASEs) that I am the problem, not Marion. The only reason there is a delay in response is if Marion likes your story. And the longer the delay, the more she likes it and is waiting for me to give her a word count on the upcoming issues so that she can find the space. I know many of you, especially with the short-short issue, have been very patient. Thank you. I'm dancing as fast as I can.—jlb

FALLING APART...
Susan Johnson
Arlington, VA

Dear Ms. Burke,

Thank you for publishing my letter, and thank you for helping Mr. Slater out in England and all the people there who would love to have MZB's magazine too.

I already have a gift subscription for one of my sisters but enclosed is payment for two more subscriptions for two more sisters, since the first one called the others and made them jealous. Also, she told them she saw a letter published from me.

I hope nothing I said in my letter could be construed to mean that I could ever wait to read one of MZB's books until I had them all! When I had them all I just re-read them all. That is how you take care of that! They are falling apart.

Dear Susan,

That's me, slow but sure.! I

Glad you're enjoying Marion's books - she's feeling so much better, you will have more to read from her before long! (I'm lobbying for a mystery novel...)—jlb

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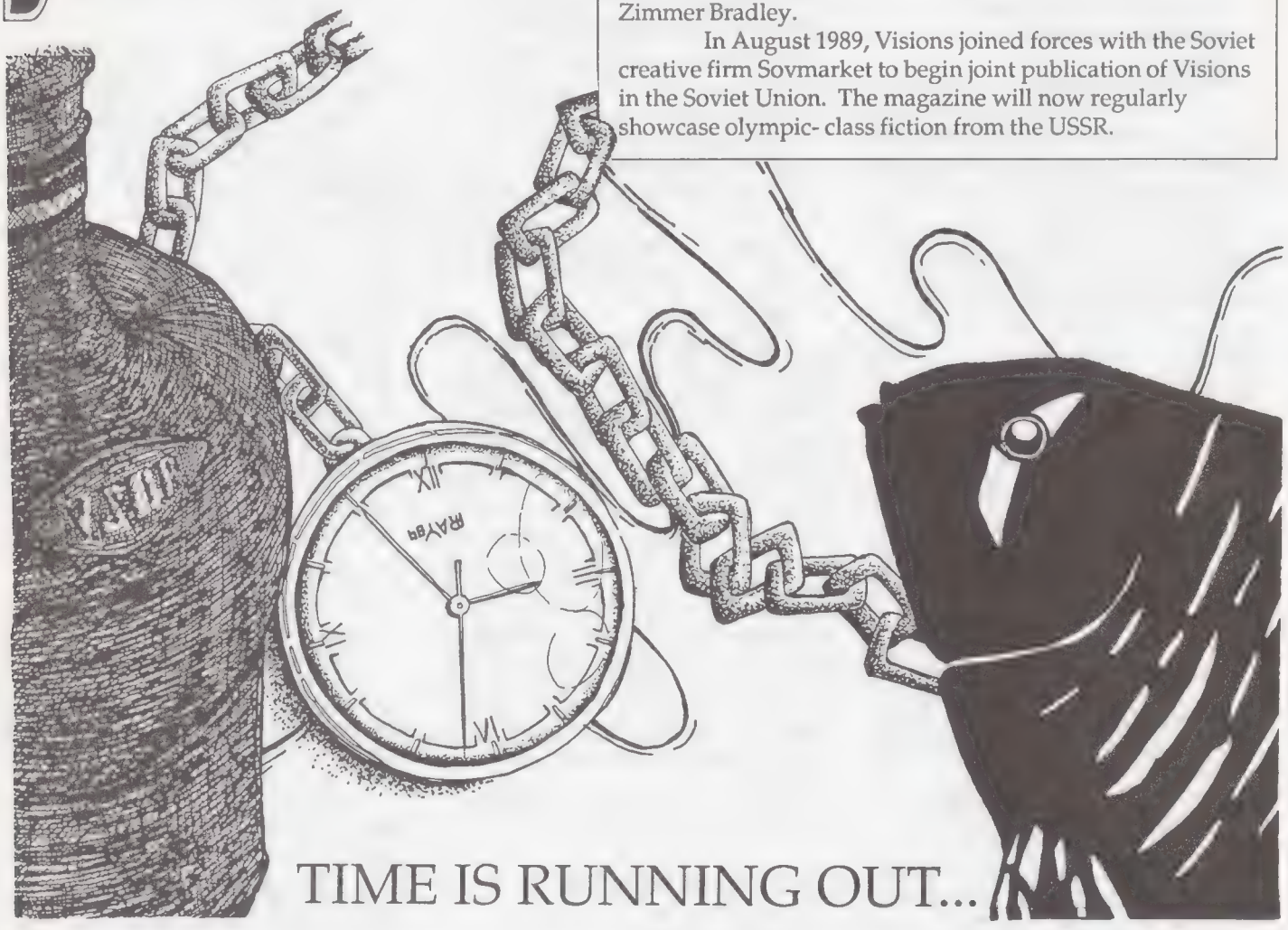

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Julio's Rock

JAMES BALKOVEK

by Barbara Rosen

"My mother, she say give you this."

"Why, thank you, Julio." *Miss Nelson smile but his face was averted. Probably embarrassed at having to bring her a peace offering, especially after the way his mother had carried on.*

"My Julio, he don't start nothing with nobody! Anybody says he hit them, they're lying!"

"Mrs. Gonzalez, I'm sorry, but I saw it *myself*."

"Well, sure, but they hit him first, right?"

"I didn't see anybody hit Julio."

"No, the teachers they never see *nothing*. My Julio, I tell him, his father tell him, 'If they hit you, hit them back.'"

"That may be necessary on the street, Mrs. Gonzalez, but it is not necessary here. I have told *all* the children that if anyone bothers them they are to report it to me. That is part of my professional responsibility. But I can only do it if Julio *tells* me -- *before* he hits back," she added hastily.

Mrs. Gonzalez had made no reply, simply stood with her eyes averted as Julio was standing now.

"Tell your mother I said, 'Thank you very much.'"

"She say it come from Puerto Rico," recited Julio; "she say to tell you it's a baby one."

Miss Nelson took the little rock between her fingers and held it up to admire it. It was unusual looking: the size of a walnut, green with a brownish band and pleasingly smooth. It was warm, too. Well, Julio had been holding it.

"Look at this, Julio."

Miss Nelson lifted a small terra cotta pot from the windowsill.

"See this? It's called a lithops. It's a kind of cactus, but it doesn't have any thorns so it protects itself by looking like a rock so animals can't find it and eat it. Your rock," she said, setting the pebble next to the plant, "looks just like a lithops. I think I'll leave it there, okay?"

Julio shrugged.

Why does he have to be hostile? Miss Nelson considered him with her usual mixture of admiration and exasperation: His wavy light brown hair, and

Julio's Rock

smooth, round cheeks; the long lashes shadowing eyes she could never seem to meet. Only in the first grade and his parent's influence showed already - those Latins with all their machismo!

Well, maybe tomorrow she would ask Julio to show the class his rock and tell them about the lithops. Maybe having something special to do, knowing something the others didn't ... Who did she think she was kidding, anyway? What was that the Jesuits said? "Give us the child until he is six and he will be ours forever?"

"Did you get all your homework copied, Julio?"

"Uh-huh."

"Good. I'll see you in the morning, then. Don't forget to tell your mother I said thank you."

At least, Miss Nelson thought, watching him leave, at least we can educate. Give them the tools. Set the example. And some day when I'm old and gray -- grayer -- something I've said, some seed I've planted, may finally bloom. Not that I'm likely ever to hear about it. She smiled. Who knows? Maybe some day one of my kids will win the Nobel Prize and I don't even get excited about it because by that time I'll've forgotten his name.

But what mattered was doing the job now: planting the seeds.

"And some," she murmured fondly, "fell in the shallow soil and sprang up quickly and the sun burned their roots, and some fell among the weeds and the weeds choked them ..." She reached up absently and massaged her right shoulder where the muscles got stiff from lifting her arm to write on the blackboard all day. "But some fell in good soil and yielded abundantly."

It wasn't necessary to know the result of all her planting; not really. In fact, she thought ruefully, it might be better not to know: If she were to take credit for her few successes, might she not also have to take the blame for all the others?

Meanwhile there was this year's class. And Julio.

There were so many plants in Miss Nelson's room that she didn't immediately notice that the lithops was missing. It wasn't until she made her way to the window ledge to hand the pot to Julio that she discovered the loss.

There was the pot and there was Julio's rock, but the plant was gone. Could Julio have --? No, she was sure he hadn't: She'd locked the door herself. The custodian? Certainly not. Besides, why would anybody take just the plant?

"Julio, I'm sorry but the plant seems to be gone."

Julio nodded, looking, for once, right into her eyes. Miss Nelson was startled: Did he know something about this after all? He didn't look surprised.

"Would you like to show the other children your rock anyway?"

"Okay."

He took the rock carefully from the pot, cradling it in his palm.

"This come from Puerto Rico," he said; "it's a baby."

Some of the children giggled. Miss Nelson looked around warningly and the noise subsided.

"Do you know what kind of rock it is, Julio?" she asked.

He shook his head.

She lifted it from his palm, again noticing how warm it was. Julio must have good circulation.

"I think," said Miss Nelson, "it may be some kind of sandstone. See the bands of color?" She hesitated. What was the geology of Puerto Rico, anyway? If it was a volcanic island, would it have sedimentary rocks? She sighed and moved to safer ground.

"Julio said this was a baby rock. Can rocks really have babies?" The children were shaking their heads, some grinning.

"Okay, Courtney," Miss Nelson said, singling out the one with the biggest grin; "why can't they?"

Courtney snickered. "There's no such things as girl and boy rocks," he said.

It was Miss Nelson's turn to grin. "Tell me Courtney: Are there girl and boy trees?"

He laughed, shaking his head.

Miss Nelson's grin got broader. "There are, though."

"Huh?"

"There are girl and boy trees," she repeated. "But you're right about the rocks: Rocks don't have sexes. Why don't they?"

Silence. Evidently this class, like all the others, was shocked into speechlessness by the teacher pronouncing the word "sex" in public.

"Let me give you a hint," Miss Nelson said gently: "Do you think this rock would like a drink of water?"

Grins reappeared and heads shook.

"Do you suppose it's hungry?"

"No!"

If I put it in the closet and forget about it, will it get lonely?"

"No!" Giggles broke out.

"Why not?"

"Because it's dead!" Latisha shouted.

"No, it isn't dead; that's just the point. It can't be dead because it was never ..."

"Alive?" said Jeffrey.

"Good for you! That's right: A rock is not alive. So it doesn't eat or drink or have babies or die. It can break, but it cannot die."

Time to return to the original point.

"What would be a better word than 'baby' to describe the size of this rock?"

"Little?"

"M-hm. What else?"

"Small?"

"Good. Who can think of another one?"

"Teeny-tiny?"

"Of course. Or you could leave out the descriptive word altogether and call it a pebble."

Fine; now she'd confused them again. "Don't you ever watch 'The Flintstones'?"

Foreheads smoothed, heads nodded.

"What's the baby's name?"

"Pebbles?" piped up Tanisha.

"That's right. She's a little Flintstone, so they call her Pebbles. A pebble is a little rock. This," she said, holding up Julio's gift, "is a pebble."

They were smiling now; they'd gotten it.

"My mother," Julio said stubbornly, "she say it's a baby."

It finally occurred to Miss Nelson that whoever had made off with her lithops might actually have intended to steal Julio's rock. The pebble really did look amazingly like one of the smooth little cacti; it would have been an easy mistake to make.

But then, why would anybody want Julio's pebble? It wasn't as if it were valuable.

With a sort of mental shrug of the shoulders, Miss Nelson resolved to stop thinking about it.

But she left the rock in the plantless pot. It reminded her of her

lost lithops, of which she had been fond, and made an amusing visual pun.

On Monday, Miss Nelson noticed Julio by the window touching the rock. When she went over later on there was a handful of carrot tops laid carefully on the soil.

She lifted one and turned just in time to see Julio look quickly away.

"Julio?"

"Huh?"

"This was very sweet of you, but these can't grow here. Shall we put them in some water?"

Julio shrugged.

Miss Nelson got out one of the saucers she kept for setting flower pots in, ran a little water into it and moved the wilting carrot tops from the lithops pot.

"There! They ought to perk up now."

Julio didn't answer. Ah, well; so what else was new?

He must have cared, though, because at dismissal time Miss Nelson saw him go from the lithops pot to the carrot saucer and nod to himself.

"All right, everyone; size places. Are we ready?" She glanced towards the window and was relieved to see Julio making for the line. "Let's go." The children filed docilely behind her to the exit.

"Good afternoon, children."

"Good afternoon, Miss Nelson."

She stood watching as they passed on to the street, touching some as they went by, stooping to be kissed by others. Julio hurried past as usual, eyes averted. Miss Nelson sighed.

She returned to her empty classroom to wash the boards and straighten the desks so she wouldn't be rushed in the morning. Her eye fell on the saucer with the carrot tops. Might as well see how they were doing ...

What on earth! There among the reviving carrot tops was Julio's rock. Now why would he have put it *there*? Miss Nelson frowned. None of this made sense, not the pebble being moved or Julio bringing carrot tops to school or her lithops disappearing or Julio's mother sending her a present in the first place. She considered moving the pebble back to the lithops pot and decided to leave it alone.

She checked to make sure the door was locked, went down to the office and punched out.

The next morning the rock was still in the saucer, but the carrot tops were gone.

Miss Nelson, expecting to see their green stubble over the rim of the saucer, stopped half way to her closet, coat in hand. Behind her the children were taking down their chairs and unpacking their book bags.

I will not look at Julio, Miss Nelson thought; I will not give him that satisfaction. "Row one," she called mechanically.

They were gone, all right.

"Row five."

The green pebble sat half submerged in the saucer, its smooth sides gleaming.

"Row three."

It looked wider, somehow, as if it had plumped itself up with water like a sponge.

"Row six."

Miss Nelson turned away, unlocked her closet and put her coat away.

"Jeffrey, I called your row. Why haven't you hung up your coat?"

Rocks do not drink water, she thought; rocks do not eat carrot tops. Rocks cannot die because no rock has ever lived ...

"Row two."

But ... When you came right down to it, everything alive was made of minerals. A handful of minerals and lots of water and -- and whatever electrical spark or breath of the spirit made the difference between a living body and a corpse.

"Row four." Miss Nelson began writing the homework on the board.

"Where is your notebook, Jeffrey?"

The Biblical description of man's creation wasn't so far off after all.

And didn't Lucifer suggest to Jesus that he could turn stones into bread:

"Tiffany, you're late again. Hurry up!"

What was bread anyway but the substance of the stones drawn up through living roots and transformed?

Miss Nelson opened the top drawer of her desk, removed her rollbook and began methodically, deliberately, to take attendance.

There had been occasions in the course of Miss Nelson's professional career when she had been grateful for the total mental concentration her duties demanded. It was no good when you were tired or coming down with some bug, but most of the time the interaction with the children, the necessity of being constantly on your toes, was exhilarating. And there had been times, like the time she'd broken up with Sidney, like the time her mother was in the hospital, when the inability to think of anything but the moment at hand and the job to be done had been a positive blessing.

Miss Nelson sighed and looked one more time at Julio's rock basking in solitary splendor in its saucer. This was going to be one of those days when the distractions of her work would be all too welcome.

She turned resolutely away from the window, shut the rollbook and addressed her class: "Time to mark off the calendar," she said; "who can tell us today's date?"

In two weeks it would be open school night. Miss Nelson forced herself to concentrate on filling out report cards and tidying her bulleting boards. When she had to go near the windows to water her plants or snip off the dead leaves she avoided looking at the saucer where Julio's rock still lay. Sometimes there were other things in the saucer too: more carrot tops, a cabbage leaf, a handful of cooked rice. Once there was an enormous cockroach, quite dead, with its legs in the air like a lobster on a platter. No matter what was in the saucer, it was always gone the next day. Miss Nelson tried not to look, but she couldn't help herself.

Meanwhile, one corner of her mind was constantly proccupied with the rock.

Julio hadn't been afraid of it, but she had to admit that she was. The thought of touching it again gave her a sinking feeling in her stomach and made her mouth go dry. Not that it appeared dangerous, of course. Had she thought for a moment that it was dangerous, Miss Nelson would have steeled herself to carry the saucer to the nearest sewer and drop it in.

But it was small and Julio hung around it all the time and if it moved -- it must move -- it certainly couldn't move very fast. Besides, Julio's mother knew it was here in the classroom with her child. Certainly she wouldn't have let him bring it if she'd thought it might do him harm.

Unless she was counting on him

Julio's Rock

to make friends with it.

Unless she was counting on its staying small until he was safely in second grade.

The weekend got off to a bad start.

Miss Nelson labored diligently over her lesson plans, but she got them finished on Friday night in spite of herself.

And, even though she had stayed up extra late, she lurched awake early the next morning with a sense that she'd been dreaming something she'd sooner not remember. She got to the supermarket before the Saturday crowds arrived, cleaned her apartment and still had the whole afternoon to get through before there'd be anything worth watching on T.V.

She tried reading, but the words her eyes scanned failed to register on her brain.

She tried taking a walk in the park, but the outcroppings of rock thrusting up from the earth made her nervous. Supposing nothing was what it seemed? Supposing these rocks, these monstrous glittering rocks, heaved and shifted under their blankets of turf at night? Rolled over in their sleep?

"You are getting paranoid," Miss Nelson told herself firmly. "If those rocks moved, there would be earth tremors. It would be on the news, for heaven's sake!" She stopped. There had been earth tremors. It had been on the news. When was it? Back last spring? In Brooklyn? "But not in Manhattan," she said, "not in Central Park. Not here."

And she stepped off the path and went defiantly to sit on a rock. A nice, cold, hard, glittery, inanimate rock. She patted it affectionately.

"See?" she told herself; "it doesn't bite."

But that thing in her classroom ... It bit, didn't it? Sitting there under the chilly fall sky, one hand still absently caressing the rock, Miss Nelson finally permitted herself to think about it.

Why did it seem so sinister? Was it because it came from Julio?

What if somebody -- somebody else -- had made her a present of a rock that ate things? Would it still be so appalling?

Yes, Miss Nelson decided; rocks aren't supposed to-- to act like animals.

Her thoughts stopped. Supposing it wasn't a rock at all? She searched back in her memory. Had Julio said it was a rock? She didn't think so. All she could remember for sure was that he had insisted on calling it a baby.

Miss Nelson almost laughed. Nature was full of mimicry: insects that looked like leaves, sea creatures that looked like flowers, a fish that looked like a rock ... Perhaps Julio's present was some sort of exotic and fascinating snail!

Suddenly she could hardly wait to get back to work on Monday. She wanted to take a really good look at Julio's rock.

The trouble was, it really did look like a rock. Apart from its warmth (and after all, the saucer was near the radiator), there wasn't anything about it to suggest that it might be -- well, animate.

Miss Nelson frowned, pressing its hard surface between her fingertips. There was no place that looked like the closed door with which a snail sealed itself against the world. Not even the thin seam that would suggest the hinged shell of a mollusc. If some soft and vulnerable creature was alive in there, Miss Nelson couldn't begin to imagine how it got out.

She set the pebble back in the saucer, still frowning.

If she'd hoped to be reassured by a sign of life she could understand, she was farther from any such comfort than ever. But wasn't this the way it sometimes was with the children? Didn't she sometimes have to teach the human equivalent of Julio's rock, hoping against all the evidence that some of her words were penetrating through an invisible seam in a child's armor? Wasn't Julio himself one of those children whose softness was all locked up inside?

It was a nice thought, Julio and his rock being like each other. By the time Miss Nelson had turned from the window and gone to pick up her class in the yard, she was smiling.

Julio arrived late. Miss Nelson was already half way through the attendance when he arrived -- had, in fact, marked him absent for the day -- but she noticed that he took the long way around to the closet to leave a pocketful of celery ends in the saucer.

"Let's go, Julio; your homework is on the board."

Julio jumped, ducked his head and scurried to hang up his coat.

Good, thought Miss Nelson grimly; let him remember that he's got responsibilities for other things on this planet than that confounded rock. Like getting himself to school on time and developing his mind.

"Julio, did you get your note signed?"

"Huh?" His startled head popped out of the closet.

"Your note."

"Oh. I showed it to my mother, but she don't sign it."

"Is your mother coming tonight?"

"I dunno."

That figured.

"Well, I hope she is. But if she doesn't come, you have until tomorrow to get that note signed before I get on the telephone. Did you hear me, Julio?"

"Uh-huh."

Excellent. But Miss Nelson hoped Mrs. Gonzalez would show up tonight and save her the bother of calling.

Miss Nelson punched in at exactly 6:15 and went up to her classroom to make sure everything was in order before the parents arrived. As she swung open the door a glimmer of light from the hall picked out a pair of bright specks on the windowsill. Her hand froze half-way to the light switch. She waited, not breathing, as the specks dimmed out and rekindled.

Was it awake? Did it see?

Of course: it must be nocturnal. That would explain why she'd never seen it move.

As quietly as she could, Miss Nelson groped her way towards the window. She noticed that she was panting, but she didn't know if it was from excitement or fear. She didn't care: whatever was in that saucer, she was going to see it. Now.

"Miss Nelson?"

Miss Nelson stifled a scream as the lights blazed on.

"Are you all right?" Her assistant principal was standing in the doorway.

"I – good heavens, you startled me!"

"Sorry. I saw your door open and the lights weren't on, so I thought I'd better check ... Is everything okay?"

"Yes, of course it is," she snapped. Oh, Lord, now his feelings were hurt. "Thank you; you just scared me, that's all."

"Okay." He stepped back, looking relieved. "I'll be right down the hall if you need me."

"Thank you," she said again.

Miss Nelson glanced at her watch. Darn it, the parents would be here any second now. She stepped over to the window and looked into the saucer. Only a rock, just as she'd expected. Darn the man!

As the first parent appeared at the door, Miss Nelson remembered the celery ends: they were gon.

To Miss Nelson's surprise, Mrs. Gonzalez did show up that night. She looked up from the marking book she was showing to another parent and there they were, Julio and his mother, peering into the saucer. Miss Nelson paused to watch them. Julio looked happy and animated; his mother had laid her hand on his shoulder.

Why can't he be that way with me? Miss Nelson thought. Oh, well; it's nice to know he's like that with somebody. She smiled a welcome at Mrs. Gonzalez. "I'll be with you in a few minutes," she called.

"That's all right."

"Julio's work folder is on his desk."

Miss Nelson watched from the corner of her eye as they sauntered over to Julio's desk and Mrs. Gonzalez flipped casually through his papers.

It would be gratifying, thought Miss Nelson, if that woman would work up some enthusiasm for his scholastic achievements. Look at that! All she cares about is that rock -- or whatever it is.

She shut Julio and his mother out of her thoughts and turned back to the parent she'd been speaking with. By the time the woman left, she was able to confront Mrs. Gonzalez with her best professional smile.

"So, how's he acting?" Mrs. Gonzalez looked at her unsmilingly, jaws working over a wad of gum.

"Quite a bit better until yesterday," Miss Nelson said. "Did he show you the note I sent?" She looked at Julio.

"Yeah, I saw it."

"Oh. It wasn't signed, so ..."

"Yeah, I told him I ain't signing no more notes."

Miss Nelson forced herself to take a deep breath and let it out slowly before she answered.

"If you don't sign it, Mrs. Gonzalez, I have no way of knowing that you've actually seen it. Sometimes children say they've shown a note, but ..."

"My Julio, he don't lie."

"Of course, but I must try to treat all the children alike. And it was a rather serious thing, sticking his pencil into another child's hand like that."

"Yeah, well I punished him. I told him I don't want him giving no kid no lead poisoning."

Oh, Lord, thought Miss Nelson. After all her trials with the Gonzalez family she wasn't about to undermine the first sign of parental cooperation with an impromptu lecture on the anatomy of a pencil. But she was enough of a teacher to be hilariously conscious of how much she wanted to. She laid her hand over her mouth and pretended to be looking at her marking book until she was sure she wouldn't laugh.

"By the way," she said, "did Julio thank you for me? For the rock?"

"Oh." Mrs. Gonzalez smiled. "Yeah. You got lots of stuff like that, I thought you might like it."

"It's very--ah--interesting. You don't know what kind it is, do you?"

"Just a rock."

Miss Nelson nodded. "It was very nice of you to think of me," she said.

When the last parent left, Miss Nelson gathered the unclaimed report cards and slid them into her desk. At the door she turned to take one last look around the room to make sure everything was in order before turning out the lights.

That confounded rock ...

Suddenly she marched over to the window ledge, plucked up Julio's pebble and slid it into her bag.

I'm taking you home, she thought grimly; I'm taking you home until I find out what you are.

Miss Nelson was too tired to watch the rock that night; she put it in a saucer in the kitchen and went to bed. The next morning she was gratified to discover that it had remained exactly where she'd left it. But she trickled a little water into the saucer, just in case, before she left for work.

She hadn't considered what effect the rock's disappearance would have on Julio. Taking the rock home had been an impulsive act, a defiant gesture directed at her own fear. But now, watching the children enter the classroom, she caught herself waiting to see what Julio would do.

As usualy he went the long way 'round from the closet, stopping at the window ledge to peer into the saucer. Miss Nelson watched. Julio's face was turned away from her, but she saw him stiffen. For a long moment he stared into the empty saucer. Then, without a glance in her direction, he went to his seat.

I wonder what that was all about, thought Miss Nelson. Does he think one of the other kids stole it? No, he'd've said something to me. Is it possible that he thinks it walked off by itself? You just couldn't tell with that kid. She bent her head and began checking off names in the rollbook. Good heavens! Does he suspect that I'm the one who took it? She looked up at him, but he was bent studiously over his notebook. Well, what if he does? It is, after all, my rock.

Now that Miss Nelson had sole custody of Julio's rock she considered herself responsible for its care and feeding. On its second night in her home she moved its saucer to the windowsill (in case it needed light) and left a slice of tomato in the water. In the morning the tomato was still untouched. Miss Nelson shrugged, discarded the tomato and substituted a chunk of raw carrot. "We know you like carrots, right?" she said. But the carrot wasn't eaten either.

By the weekend Miss Nelson was forced to conclude that Julio's rock didn't like her. Either that, or it was as inanimate as it had always appeared to be. The latter seeming to be the sanest hypothesis, she left the rock sitting on the windowsill, washed the saucer and put it away.

The next time she looked for Julio's rock, it was gone.

Miss Nelson wouldn't have be-

Julio's Rock

lieved that the disappearance of one pebble from her windowsill could be so upsetting. She spent most of Saturday poking around under furniture, sweeping behind the radiators and taking everything out of the bottom of her closet.

It wasn't until she'd given up and started to prepare her dinner that she discovered the rock. It was snuggled up against the soap dish at the edge of the sink and most of the soap was missing.

"Eat my soap, will you?" She reached out, then hesitated and went to the cupboard for an empty jar. Keeping one eye on the rock, she punched some holes in the lid and with the can opener, eased the rock into the jar without touching it. She screwed the lid on tight. "Tomorrow, you and I are going on a trip. To the zoo."

The nightmare jolted her awake just as the sky was getting light. She lay clutching the covers, waiting for her heart to slow.

She had been alone in a city built of tawny stone. The buildings, the streets, the great encircling wall, all had that sun-struck color. She saw no one, but still there was a sense of watchfulness, of presence.

And then the voices began. Not human or -- or carnal in any way. Not organic. But voices: As if the whole city were ringing like a struck crystal, lovely and alien and terrible.

Suddenly she recognized that the city she was standing in was Jerusalem, Jerusalem where it had been prophesied that were the people to hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out.

A city built of living stone, she thought. Dear God.

She got to her feet and padded into the kitchen in the half light to put the water on for coffee. She'd skip church, she decided; the sooner Julio's rock was out of her apartment, the better she'd feel.

"Ow!" Something on the sink top had sliced into her palm. "What the --?" She fumbled for the light switch.

"Oh my God." The jar was shattered all over the counter and the floor; it was a mercy she hadn't stepped on any of the pieces. She wrapped the dish towel around her cut hand and picked her way through the mess on the floor in search of bandages.

The cut wasn't big, but it was deep. It took a few minutes to stop the bleeding and apply the bandage one-handed. When she returned to the kitchen, shod and armed with a broom, the first thing she saw was Julio's rock. It was on the counter, on the very spot where she had cut herself. There had been a few drops of blood, she remembered, but they were gone now. Still watching the rock, she began to sweep up the glass.

Miss Nelson brought the rock to the zoo in an old cookie tin. She hadn't bothered to punch any holes in the lid this time: Somehow the creature's taste for her blood had discouraged solicitude. She supposed she should just dump the thing down the incinerator, but now that she was sure it was alive, she couldn't quite bring herself to do it. Besides, the zoo would probably be delighted to get such an unusual speciment. My good deed for the day, thought Miss Nelson. Well, they're more than welcome to it.

"I'd like to speak to a zoo-keeper?"

"That's me, lady. ve brought you a--an animal."

"In there?" He eyed the tin incredulously. "Is it alive?"

"Oh, yes." She pried at the edges of the lid, easing it loose. The zoo man leaned closer, peering.

"What is this, a pet rock?"

"No, it's--I--I'm afraid I don't know what it is."

"It's a rock," he said flatly. "Look, lady, I don't have time for jokes."

"It's not a joke! It -- it moves around. And eats things."

His expression said he had no time for crazy ladies either.

"I thought you might at least tell me what it was," she concuded.

"I did tell you. Now if you'll excuse me . . ."

Miss Nelson left.

For along time Miss Nelson wandered through the park, still clutching the tin. She couldn't -- wouldn't -- take it home again. Not after ---

She sat on a bench, pondering. Why not turn it loose? she thought. Nobody would bother it; there would be plenty for it to eat . . . Why not?

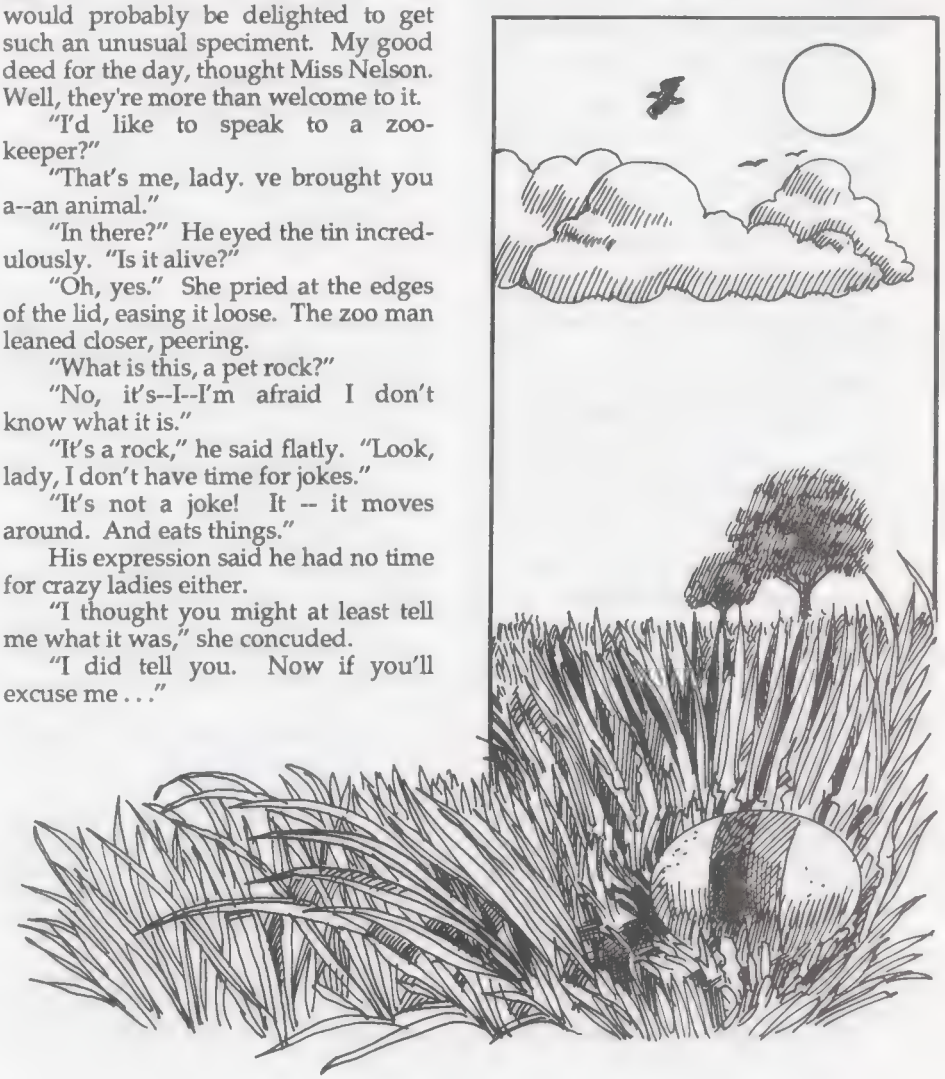
She pried open the tin and rolled the pebble out onto the grass.

As she walked away she had a sudden clear vision of Julio's rock, liberated at last, growing fat on weeds and beetles, lying in wait for the unwary pedestrian, whispering its secrets to the vast, sleeping rocks jutting out from the hills.

Miss Nelson hesitated. Should she go back?

She shook her head, dumped the cookie tin in a trash can and continued on her way .

Barbara Rosen



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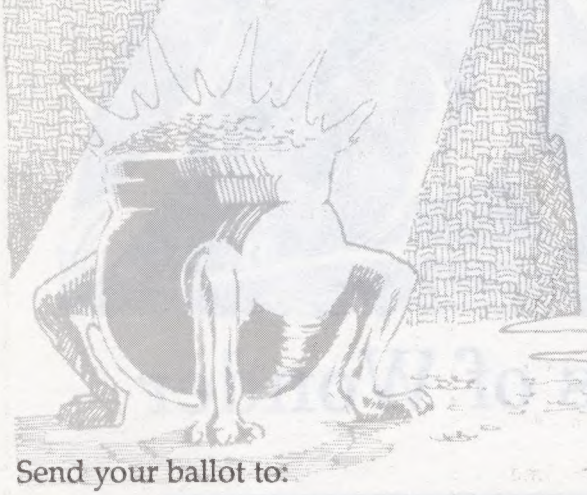

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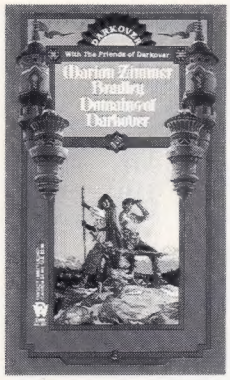

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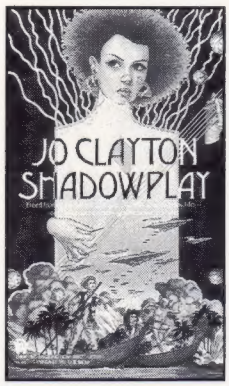

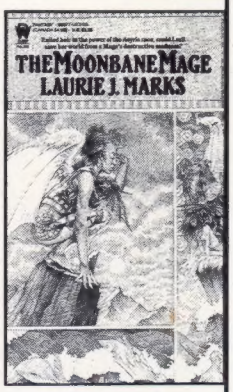

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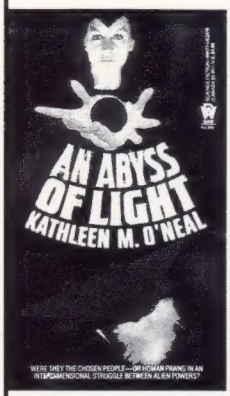

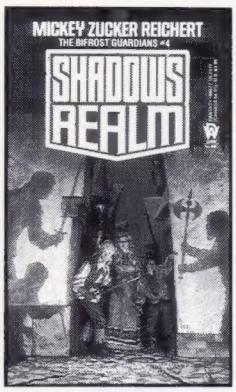

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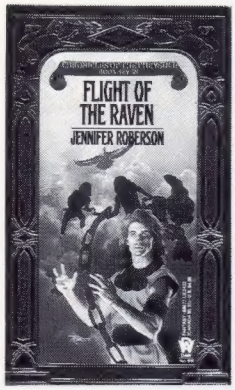

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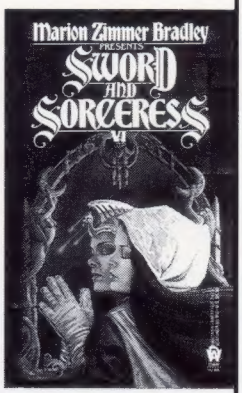

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